

## ARTICLE

## A REFLECTION ON NULL CURRICULUM

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** In this paper we scrutinize the concept of null curriculum critically—what schools do not teach—and two questions were in the focus: 1) what are different kinds of null curriculum? 2) What general factors affect the null curriculum in the Iranian educational system? In each of these questions, particular attention is given in clearly defining this almost ambiguous concept. It also defines two types of null curriculums namely intended and implemented null curriculum and the factors that affect the development of it. **Background:** Curriculum development has always been a matter of concern for educational institutions, and it is one of the most important areas in language teaching and learning. The concept of curriculum can be recognized as a connective link between teacher and student, organized in such a way to achieve goals determined by the teacher already, the learning organization or by the curriculum designers. It must be noted that conception of curriculum plays a significant role in defining the null curriculum, and pointed out that relationship to a given null curriculum can be identified only in relation to what is valued as educationally significant. **Method:** in this study, several studies related to curriculum designing as well as other aspects of curriculum were reviewed. Furthermore, we also searched various scientific sites to obtain related information and required data. Afterwards, theoretical views, problems involved, and related strategies about them were presented. **Conclusion:** The tips and suggestions presented in this article can be applied in certain practical areas of curriculum development and evaluation. Curriculum and syllabus designing is one of the fundamental cornerstones of every educational system. The focus of this paper is on null curriculum, although various variables affect curriculum designing, the most important of all were presented here. It also reviews the role of teachers and the students in designing curriculum and investigates how important are their roles in establishing and implementing curriculum. It seems that there are some determining factors that affect curriculum and syllabus designing in the Iranian educational system and also some tips that syllabus designers and developers must take into consideration to meet the educational needs and purposes.

### INTRODUCTION

Curriculum development has always been a matter of concern for educational institutions, and it is one of the most important areas in language teaching and learning. The concept of curriculum can be perceived as a connective link between teacher and student, organized in such a way to achieve goals previously set by the teacher, the learning organization or by the curriculum specialists. The above definition, of course, does not cover all the meanings of curriculum, especially when we think of them in a variety of contexts and situations where different goals and objectives need to be pursued. In certain situations the curriculum is used to diagnose learning problems and restore connections between the teacher and the learner, while in other situations it can be conceived as a framework that provides external settings for the learning process. However, the above definitions fail to incorporate all the aspects related to curriculum designing and its interaction with teaching process and learning community.

In this perspective, the process of decision-making to update the curriculum should be supported by a platform of shared values, images and beliefs that would be crucial in the process of organizing the intended and planned learning framework. Several scholars have defined curriculum.

According to Tanner and Tanner a curriculum is a plan or program of all experiences which the learner encounters under the direction of a school [1].

Hoover and Patton believe that issues such as strategies, settings, and management should be taken into consideration along with teaching skills and the context [2]. Eisner in his textbook, *The Educational Imagination*, categorized curriculum into three types: [1] explicit (stated), [2] hidden (unofficial, or implied), and [3] null (excluded) [3]. According to Urevbu the explicit curriculum refers to what is laid down as the syllabus or that which is to be learnt by students [4]. It is the officially selected body of knowledge which government, through the Ministry of Education or anybody offering education, wants students to learn [4]. The explicit curriculum is at the same time both the planned content, and the abilities that form the taught lessons [3]. This is usually understood as a document which includes details about goals, objectives, contents, teaching techniques, evaluation, and assessment [5]. The hidden curriculum, on the other hand, is considered as a process for students to be socialized [3, 5] Apple believes that hidden curriculum encompasses the tacit teaching to students of norms, values, and dispositions that goes on simply by their living in and coping with the institutional expectations and routines of schools [6].

And finally the null curriculum, coined by Eisner, the area which would be elaborated and discussed in this paper, is a program that schools do not teach [7]. It consists of areas in language teaching and learning which

#### KEY WORDS

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often have been omitted or removed intentionally, since they are not accepted by sociopolitical conventions, or by the mindset of the students.

The null curriculum explicitly draws us to consider the fact that when we are developing a curriculum, some things are left out. It is a fact that schools cannot teach everything, and thus, all demands of the educational system cannot be met. Eisner argues more generally that what is not taught may be as educationally significant as what is taught: I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problem [7].

### Developing curriculum

Given the rapid evolution of necessary knowledge, skills and the need to take into account global, national, state, and local cultures, the core curriculum must ensure that students will develop the essential knowledge and proficiency they need to be successful in college, in a career, in their communities, and in life.

The term curriculum is a Latin word meaning the course of a chariot race [8]. Traditionally, the curriculum consisted of two components: content and examination [9]. According to Burton & McDonald, providing a dictionary definition for this concept is difficult, mainly due to its complicated nature [10]. However, it can be defined in terms of a list of topics to be taught at school or in other academic institutions. For a wider view of point, all the experiences that the students undergo while being part of that institution.

Harden et al. points out that a curriculum should not be simply considered as a combination of separate topics and issues, but as a big picture in which the whole is much greater than any individual part [11]. According to Garcia-Barbero, a curriculum is the final product of aggregating a number of factors such as content, strategies, and methods to guarantee the quality in education, but should be a proper combination to ensure efficiency and facilitate learning [12]. Harden elaborating on this concept says, a curriculum is a sophisticated blend of educational strategies, course content, learning outcomes, educational experiences, assessment, educational environment and the individual students' learning style, personal timetable and the program of work [13].

According to Cheong Cheng, to achieve the purposes of planned education and curriculum targets, some relationships must be taken into consideration such as the relationship between curriculum development and teacher competence and attitudes in teaching [14]. Thus, the implementation and development of the curriculum could be followed in three stages: first, at individual level in which a teacher plans or performs it; second, at team level in which the collaboration of teachers is taken into account; and third, at school oriented level in which school authorities' views and attitudes are registered. This research indicates that the importance of materials covered at schools is influenced by different views discussed above [14].

### Teacher and student's roles in curriculum designing

The productive involvement of students in curriculum development can lead to greater students' interest in learning and their more satisfaction. Eisner demonstrates the students' role in curriculum development and questions the negative impact of external evaluations upon the teacher's curricular decisions [15]. He asks, What opportunities do students have to formulate their own purposes and to design ways to achieve them? [15].

Recent researches show that the more students are engaged in education, the more successful they are and there is a positive link between the engagement and learning process. For example, Carini, Kuh, and Klein's broad-based, university-level analysis found that student engagement is linked positively to desirable learning outcomes such as critical thinking and grades [16].

On the other hand, teachers have significant roles in designing curriculum. While curriculum specialists, administrators and outside educational companies spend countless hours developing curriculum, it is the teachers who know best what the curriculum should look like. According to Zeiger and Media, in order to create a strong curriculum, teachers must play an integral role in every step of the curriculum development [17].

### Planning

Teachers know their students' needs better than others involved in the curriculum process. While state standards often dictate the skills expected from the curriculum, a teacher can provide insight into the types of materials, activities and specific techniques that need to be included. Teachers from multiple grade-levels may collaborate to identify the skills students need at each level, and ensure that the curriculum adequately prepares students to advance to the next grade-level and to meet the standards.

## Creation

Because teachers must apply the curriculum, they should have input into its creation. A teacher can gauge whether an activity fits into a specified time frame and whether it engages students in intended activities. If multiple teachers use the curriculum, we should allow as many of them as possible to provide their input during the creation stage. As teachers provide input, they gain their ownership in the final product and feel more confident that the curriculum was built upon their own concerns and according to the needs of their particular students.

## Implementation

Teachers must implement the curriculum in their own classrooms, sticking to the plan that has taken so much time, effort, and careful planning. Teacher can make minor changes. In fact, a strong curriculum is designed to allow a teacher to be flexible and to insert a few personalized components or choose from among a selection of activities.

## Reflection

Research on teacher participation in curricular decision-making is varied. The literature focuses heavily on the engagement of teachers in the determination of curriculum within their own schools or within their own classrooms. Site-based management efforts over the decades have consistently demonstrated that despite administrative directives for teachers to take an active role in the determination of curricula within their own work settings, the efficacy of such measures is limited [18, 19].

## Null curriculum

The concept of the null curriculum points out to the exact analysis of the curriculum that looked for what is left out or neglected, and concentrates on how the curriculum is conceptually designed and implemented. The null curriculum opens new windows for thinking which is not suggested by other curricula to the students and therefore its educational potential and significance have been overlooked. Generally speaking, a null curriculum proposes what is not taught. Meanwhile, excluding some particular idea or sets of ideas may not be merely the results of the curriculum. Other causes would probably be the preferences of educational administrators, teacher's lack of knowledge, or deeply ingrained assumptions and biases of instructors. Teachers and schools may not be willing to teach that Christopher Columbus slaughtered many of the native peoples he encountered during his discovery of the Americas. Similarly, some other teachers are not interested to teach evolution. Eisner first described and defined aspects of null curriculum. He states that:

There is something of a paradox involved in writing about a curriculum that does not exist. Yet, if we are concerned with the consequences of school programs and the role of curriculum in shaping those consequences, then it seems to me that we are well advised to consider not only the explicit and implicit curricula of schools but also what schools do not teach. It is my thesis that what schools do not teach may be as important as what they do teach. I argue this position because ignorance is not simply a neutral void; it has important effects on the kinds of options one is able to consider, the alternatives that one can examine, and the perspectives from which one can view a situation or problems [7].

## Aspects of the null curriculum

Null curriculum is generally divided into two broad categories namely the intended, and the implemented null curriculum:

### Intended null curriculum

The purpose of the null curriculum is not providing a procedure to be applied by curriculum developers. Instead, the null curriculum could be affected by the policies of every government and dominant parties in general and educational system in specific. For example, in some countries such as, the United States and Britain, religious teachings are banned from teaching programs. In other countries like Iran sexology has been removed from schools and preschools [20]. Another example is the change of authorship in texts that happens in academic years, mainly, for the sake of psychological benefits and interests of a certain party that leads to the change of content and teaching methods and books in Iran.

### Implemented null curriculum

Implemented null curriculum removes parts of the curriculum and textbooks through teachers and other authorities to meet the needs and interests of students. Studying the mathematics curriculum in many countries such as, the United States indicates that the US students have more capabilities in this area compared to students of China [21]. This demonstrates that the teachers are highly efficient in the U.S.

Another study shows that teachers in China use the class time more efficiently than teachers in other countries. Further, they use more difficult questions in their classrooms [22]. Conducting a study with the primary school students in China, Yeping shows that there is a relationship between the teachers' knowledge of curriculum and teaching methods in teachers' guide books. The results show that aspects of knowing, understanding and discovery of contents are designed in such a way to influence the methods teachers teach. In another study, the role of history teachers and its impact on presented materials in the class is examined [23]

### Factors affecting null curriculum in Iran

There are several factors which affect all curriculum development in both educational environments and learning centers. Before deciding on any kind of curriculum, certain points must be taken into consideration, including learning goals and kinds of knowledge desired. Factors affecting curriculum development comprise government norms and codes, politics, history, administrators or government control, and environmental factors [24]. For a curriculum to be justifiable, some concerns of the nation such as ideology, politics, economy, technology, and so on must be regarded. Below, there are some general factors which may affect the curriculum design in Iranian educational setting:

#### Gender segregation

There is a long history of single-gender education, in which boys and girls attend separate-schooling. This may be done solely for educational purposes or as a response to clerical demands such as dress codes for the female. For instance, images of the women without proper hair covering are removed. Accordingly, this strict separation at educational settings is led to weak abilities in social relationships and fails to understand the characteristics, nature, and proper interaction with a number of populations. Some disciplines were limited just to females, and male students were not permitted to study them such as certain majors in law. In the same way, male students were not allowed to enter fields such as, midwifery, gynecology, and so on.

**Lack of Reliable References for Notions Such As Love and Man-Woman Relationships:** Nowadays, the education of children, adolescents and even the youths are affected by issues like love and emotions. Elaborations on such feelings are often considered as taboos and therefore are not appreciated. A study carried out by Tahmasb Zade concerning love affairs in curriculum revealed that both teachers and students regard it as an essential component [25].

One of the most important roles of belief system is seen in the instruction of sexology, where curriculum designing is on the agenda. Sexology instruction is a taboo in many belief-centered systems; hence, no space is allotted to such topics in the school books. Naturally, they would be excluded from preschool and school curriculum in the country [20]. In these cases, students have no chance to learn appropriate ways of behavior towards the opposite gender in their life.

#### Politics

Politics affect curriculum development in numerous ways. National ideology and philosophy have a tremendous influence on the educational system; it determines and defines the goals, contents, learning experiences, and evaluation strategies in education. Giroux identifies schools as political institutions inextricably linked to the issues of power and control in any given society [26].

Attitudes of programmers, policy and decision makers should not be neglected nonetheless. Textbook designers are always affected by national interests, political parties, and party politics. Consistent with this, policymakers decide what parts to be removed from the contents of the books. Depending on the setting and the dominant party, some historical periods, ideologies or people are excluded from the textbooks. Sometimes this removal makes a big information gap which students may suffer to understand facts in the future. For example, in the U.S., history curricula often fail to cover topics such as, the labor movement, the importance of religion in American life, or the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Gehrke, Knapp, and Sirotnik point out that the excluded curriculum is powerful by virtue of its absence [27].

#### Fundamental developments in humanities

After the 1979 Revolution, disciplines such as economics and law underwent fundamental changes. Economics, which was inspired by western and European ideas was replaced by Islamic economics. Similarly, a law which was affected by, and adopted from western rules experienced substantial changes in its form and contents.

The new policy stressed on the fact that the humanities have been highly influenced by western culture and that they had to be revised. Hence, texts incongruent with new values were banned.

## Society and Demands

Since every society has its own expectations, curriculum designers have to consider public demands for the development of their suggested curriculums. Otherwise, the curriculum does not reach its purposes.

## Emphasizing social integration and monolingual rather than multilingual and multicultural education

Iran is a multicultural and multiethnic land in which each ethnic community possesses its own culture, attitude, and tradition. Therefore, policymakers and educational planners must take into consideration these issues while designing the curriculum. In this regard, the question is the issue of priority: whether to go for a single-voiced educational content, or to develop the curriculum on the basis of ethnic demands.

## Technology

Technology-driven curriculum development is one of the norms of the twenty-first century. Computer technology of this age influences curriculum development at every level of learning. Classrooms and learning centers increasingly provide computers as prerequisite interactional studies among students. This increased progress which has taken place in different areas of science, technology, education, has led curriculum planners and designers, experts and scholars of educational issues update the structure, goals, programs, content and methods of the education system.

## Economy

All the government planning in the various communities is often done in cultural, social, political, research and developmental areas which is in harmony with the economic power of that community. This is especially true with educational planning. Poor countries encounter massive problems due to weaknesses of the economy in the areas of training, education, health, unemployment, low productivity, depending on foreigners and population pressures.

Today, countries with strong economic foundations can take basic steps in educational planning. In case the inputs of such planning are appropriate and applied explicitly through an appropriate process, the output will be economically valuable. If investment is carried out in education, but the outputs do not possess enough quality or quantity, it signals that investment in educational system does not have proper output. To express the impacts of economy on education, considering a point is essential: the effect of the overall economy of the society and the average revenue of that country on its educational system is enormous. One of the economic issues associated with education is the development of infrastructures, laboratories and educational facilities, which are almost not accessible in rural areas.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Null curriculum often takes the form of the purposeful and deliberate exclusion of the perspectives, issues, and histories of particular populations and cultures. Some parameters are historically and culturally left out in designing Iranian educational curriculum including, philosophers, writers, poets, and scholars of other thoughts, their viewpoints and ideas, western literature and philosophy and so on. Throughout this paper, null curriculum is classified into 5 general categories, which influence planning and codification of the Iranian school curriculum. This classification, however, is general and since they are interrelated, they overlap each other. These five classifications fall within the areas of belief system, politics, society, technology, and economy.

The curriculum takes much the hue of the belief system and male and female students do not receive egalitarian education. It seems that the 'politics', especially in the new political system, has a great influence in choosing the contents of the educational curriculum at schools and universities at the present time. Fundamental changes in education system include the exclusion of western, colonial, imperial, and communist works, individuals, and ideas all under the influence of the new policies.

Society takes the next place in this classification. From such impacts, we could point to societal integration and mono-lingual education rather than multicultural and multi-lingual approaches, and also gender-biased attitudes in the educational curriculum.

Technology as another parameter has its own influence on curriculum development. This aspect of the null curriculum has been imposed because of the lack of educationally appropriate environments and technological equipment for fostering innovation in schools.

Last but not least is Economy. Economy is one of the most fundamental concerns in every country and can directly and indirectly touch the educational system in general and in specific.

Curriculum designing begins with a series of wished purposes or values. It is continued through a developmental process and is terminated in successful learning experiences of students [28]. Curriculum, in its contents, is divided into three types: formal, hidden, and null. Null curriculum is a kind of curriculum in which some aspects are excluded (either intentionally or unintentionally) from classroom instruction. But, as Eisner points out, what we exclude from daily teaching and learning may be just as important as what we include [3]. The null curriculum may explain the lack of adequate progress towards benchmarks or objectives more accurately than the explicit or hidden curriculum alone. Large number of materials, as requested or unwanted are removed from school curriculum and materials for various reasons are excluded. There are several factors affecting all curriculum development in both educational environments and learning centers. Before deciding, designing, and developing any kind of curriculum, certain points must be taken into consideration, including learning goals and kinds of knowledge desired.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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#### FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None.

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