

# Reconceptualization of curriculum studies: A brief history and personal memories

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## Abstract

The article presents a brief history of the *reconceptualization* of curriculum studies based on documents and my own memories. Reconceptualization has had a significant impact on understanding the curriculum not only as goals and instructional actions followed by evaluation but as a complicated, interdisciplinary conversation. Reconceptualization originated in the USA in the 1970s, when a new generation of curriculum researchers challenged the dominant Tylerian perspective on curriculum.

The first years of reconceptualization were, however, turbulent. Reconceptualists presented critiques of managerial perspectives in curriculum theorizing but, according to critiques, had no clear theory to replace the mainstream. In the 1980s and 1990s, reconceptualist scholars focused on understanding curriculum, presenting extensive pieces of work, such as Pinar's and his colleagues' book titled *Understanding Curriculum*. Also, William Doll made a significant impact on describing the postmodern context for education and curriculum. During the last 20 years, reconceptualization has taken steps towards discourses with the educational practice. This same perspective is also evident in the Finnish research on curriculum studies. In addition to being a complicated conversation, education should focus on promoting autobiographical and identity-related processes. Arts is often proposed as a context for expanding imagination and creativity. Despite the general practical perspectives, reconceptualization is still a critical movement against simplistic, technocratic models in which curriculum is prescribed and measurable learning objectives dominate.

*Keywords:* curriculum, curriculum studies, reconceptualization, Tyler rationale

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## Introduction

In this introductory article, my purpose is to present a brief history of discourses and research within the so-called *reconceptualization* movement of curriculum studies. Originally, this North American movement has had a great impact on the (re)understanding of the origins, key roles and functions of the curriculum in education and pedagogy.

Before going into detail, it is important to discuss the concept of the curriculum. Traditionally, the curriculum has been interpreted as a plan for instruction based on student needs (see, e.g. Taba, 1962; Tyler, 1949). Originally, the term ‘curriculum’ in educational contexts dates back to the 16th century, when Petrus Ramus used this word to refer to education. The Latin origin word *currere* refers to ‘running in a racetrack’ (e.g. Doll, 1993). The first known use in an educational context is in *Professio Regia*, a work by the University of Paris professor Petrus Ramus, published posthumously in 1576 (Hamilton, 2014), p. 55). The term subsequently appears in the University of Leiden records in 1582 (Hamilton, 2014, p. 5). History indicates that the concept of curriculum has been used for almost 500 years of systematic education. Curriculum deals broadly with the questions of what schools should teach and what students should learn. From the societal point of view, it is important to consider what knowledge is worth knowing for young generations to prepare them for the future. Curriculum has been needed to bring better order to this kind of educational planning (Hamilton, 2014, p. 47).

During the history of educational theorizing, the curriculum field has been divided into myriad perspectives and movements. In the 20th century, American and European educational thinking had their own histories, although it is clear that before that, in the 19th century, European theorizing had a big impact on American curriculum theories. For instance, Herbart’s educational thinking was well-accepted in the USA in the late 19th century (Dunkel, 1969). Discourses between European and US curriculum researchers have become more common again during the last 30 years.

The reconceptualization movement, which I call it in this article, originates from discourses on the nature of the curriculum in the USA. However, it had a lot of relevance to international discourses and curriculum theorizing because of the impact of American theorizing on worldwide education, particularly after the Second World War.

Before going into a more detailed discussion, I must admit that my perspectives of reconceptualization are limited and maybe (too) subjective to give an extensive and neutral picture of the movement and ideas that the researchers affiliated with it have presented. The topics and pieces of studies I will discuss are personally important for my own understanding of education and curriculum.

## Early history of reconceptualization

Janet Miller (1999), one of the key persons in the reconceptualization movement, emphasizes that reconceptualization is not a unified theory about curriculum. "...many in graduate and undergraduate curriculum programs, have studied the reconceptualization, even as William Pinar has explained that there was no methodologically or ideologically unified 'Reconceptualist' point of view or even points of view." (Miller, 1999, p. 498)

The reconceptualization movement grew out of a desire to make the curriculum field more theoretical, to move away from the practice-oriented approaches in which managerial, technocratic, or positivistic perspectives of curriculum development and design dominated the discourse (Miller, 1999, pp. 498–9). Miller (1999) mentions in her article about the history of reconceptualization that the early theorists shared the resistance to educational technologies that "try to separate content, pedagogy and learning into discrete, measurable, and observable units of behavior and product" (p. 506).

William Pinar refers to this same criticism by stating that "the Reconceptualization challenged the dominant tradition in the field, a tradition characterized by behavioral objectives, planning, and evaluation" (Pinar, 1988, pp. 483–4).

With those remarks, both authors referred to researchers who "challenged this tradition – that is, suggested that the function of curriculum studies was not the development and management but the scholarly and disciplined understanding of educational experience, particularly in its political, cultural, gender, and historical dimensions" (Pinar, 1988, p. 484). Many researchers who had difficulties in accepting the managerial and technocratic approaches in curriculum design shared this understanding in the early 1970s.

The traditional perspective, which Miller and Pinar mention as dominating, was based on the so-called Tyler rationale (Tyler, 1949), a model in which the long historical development of instrumental rationality of developing education culminated (Autio, 2006, pp. 108–9). Ralph Tyler introduced the model for curriculum design in his book "*Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction*" (Tyler, 1949). This model that Jackson (1992) described as the 'Bible of the curriculum' is very simple. It includes four steps for curriculum design. The first step is the development of instructional objectives. The second step describes the development of learning experiences that should lead to the attainment of objectives. The third step involves ordering the instruction so that the learning experiences are taking place in the most suitable order for effective learning. The fourth and final step is the evaluation of learning results in relation to objectives set in the first stage of planning (Tyler, 1949). The simplicity of the model may be one reason for its popularity among curriculum developers.

The model was also criticized because of its straightforwardness and simplicity. According to many theorists, Tyler's rationale represented a model that had a lot of unpredicted consequences for education. Although Tyler emphasized the key role of developing the educational objectives, giving almost half of his book to describing this part of the process, Doll (1993) summarized one line of the criticism by stating that:

The linear nature of the sequence allows the goals or ends to exist apart from the means of implementation and evaluation, with the evaluation referring only to the success of the implementation, not to the question of the appropriateness of the ends. Being pre-selected, objectives as ends are elevated beyond or made external to the process itself (p. 53).

Tyler himself did not specify whose duty it is to develop the objectives. He mentions 'an acceptable educational philosophy' as a procedure to select and screen the suitability of objectives (Tyler, 1949, p. 13). The question of the process of choosing the objectives is left open, and according to Doll (1993, p. 53), this separates Tyler from Dewey, who emphasized that the criteria for selecting the ends of education that are value-laden, are essential to any educational enterprise considering itself to be more than training or indoctrination.

Westbury (1998) raises another problem in the Tyler rationale concerning the role of teachers. According to him, in the rationale,

teachers are always... the invisible *agents* of the system, to be remotely controlled by that system for public ends, *not* independent actors with their own visible role to play in the schools... The curriculum and its transmission, teaching, is ideally 'teacher-proof'. Thus, both traditional curriculum theory and 'practical' curriculum work have seen the abstracted teacher as a (if not the) major brake on the necessary innovation, change, and reform that the schools always require, a 'problem' which must be addressed by highly elaborated theories and technologies of *curriculum implementation*. (p. 52–53.)

The rationale gave direct instructions for teachers and teacher education on how instruction should be designed and executed in practice. Consequently, teacher education should be reformulated to prepare teachers with the best methods for effective delivery of the contents and attainment of the goals.

Although Tyler's rationale was historically an important milestone in curriculum studies, it was not the main reason for curriculum revisions in the US. Pinar (1988) argues that it was Sputnik in 1957 that shocked America about its schools and their performance. As a result, the Kennedy administration initiated the curriculum reform. This curriculum reform was not led by curriculum specialists but by specialists from different academic disciplines.

Consequently, the traditional curriculum theorizing weakened as a field, giving opportunities for new kinds of theorizing for young scholars of the field. (Pinar, 1988, p. 484.)

One of the first milestones in the development of reconceptualization was James B. Macdonald's article in 1971, in which he divided curriculum theorists into 'three major camps' (Macdonald, 1971). William Pinar (1975) applied this division and named those groups as traditionalists, conceptual-empiricists, and reconceptualists (Miller, 1999). Reconceptualists were those who attempted to understand the nature of the educational experience, not prescribe or design this experience.

During the 1970s, reconceptualized thinking developed at the annual conferences, where divisions into separate 'camps' among those interested in revising the field emerged. This development is well-documented in William Pinar's article (Pinar, 1988). In the late 1970s *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* was founded and started publishing articles – also from those whose ideas might have been rejected by the traditional journals of the field (Miller, 1999). Little by little, this development led to a diminishing critique in the Tylerian tradition and increasing attention to emerging themes interested by the scholars related to the movement.

Summarizing the discussion in this section of the early history of the movement, it should be noted that there were also quite severe critics against the argumentation of the reconceptualist researchers. Maybe the most severe was presented in an article by Tanner & Tanner (1979) published in *Educational Researcher*. The was titled *Emancipation from Research: The Reconceptualist Prescription*. One of the arguments in the article was that the movement had no 'identifiable reconceptionist theory' of curriculum (Tanner & Tanner, 1979, p. 9). The movement presented critique but lacked a theory. Maxine Greene (1978) saw a problem in William Pinar's orientation. According to her, Pinar was more interested in radical critique than in solutions to societal problems such as social injustice, poverty, children, and their rights (Tanner & Tanner, 1979). In retrospect, Tanner & Tanner's critique was argumentative and fair to, for instance, Hilda Taba's earlier theorizing of the curriculum which followed mainly the ideas Bobbitt (1918/1972) and Tyler (1949) had been presented earlier (see Taba, 1962). Another critique worth mentioning in this context was presented by Peter Hlebowitch, who defended Tyler's rationale (Hlebowitch, 1995).

Talk of reconceptualization in the curriculum field, in fact, was often associated with the presumption that the Tyler *Rationale* was out of date and better forgotten. Many of these extended criticisms of the *Rationale* went against the historical record and fundamentally failed to understand that the Tyler *Rationale*

was more than one man's idea on curriculum development. Missing from the discussion was any acknowledgement that the *Rationale* followed a historical stream of thought that recognized the value of proposing a problem-solving framework for the school, one that was attuned to the nature of the learner, the values of the society and the wider world of knowledge. The *Rationale* was not the only way to conduct a curriculum, but it was a way that had the historical sanction of various progressive-experimentalists, and its popularity had something to do with the fact that few others had managed to develop an orchestral procedure to curriculum development. (p. 91.)

The discourses indicate that the early years of reconceptualization were turbulent in many ways. Reconceptualists presented critique of managerial perspectives in curriculum theorizing but had no clear message or theory to replace the mainstream. Also, it was evident that many researchers addressing the critique had differing and rivalling perspectives concerning society in general and education in particular. Some of those differences were political, some philosophical, and some related to disciplinary orientations within education or outside.

### Later developments in curriculum studies

The development of reconceptualist thinking in the curriculum began with criticism of the traditional paradigm. Later developments expressed in the publications in the 1980s and 1990s focused more on understanding the essence and the nature of the philosophical and historical roots of the curricula. The most important of those publications was titled *Understanding Curriculum* by Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995). This extensive work introduced the curriculum concept from 14 different perspectives, from historical discourses to developments in gender, poststructuralist, and racial theory. It also included chapters on political texts, phenomenology, aesthetics, theology, and international developments. The book was magnificent. Reading it was an eye-opening experience that greatly impacted my understanding of the concept. I strongly feel that it also affected those following the reconceptualization in the same way. The book was adopted as a key text for advanced curriculum courses at the University of Tampere. It was more than clear that the concept of curriculum was a complicated issue and that its contents could be interpreted from very different points of view. It was not that clear, however, if anything was wrong with the Finnish or European curricula. It is a big jump from theoretical ideas to educational practice.

My interest in the reconceptualization movement began a little earlier than the publication of the book mentioned above. During my sabbatical in 1993 at Texas Technical University, USA, I happened to read William Doll's newly published book *A Post-Modern Perspective on Curriculum*. In the foreword, Jonas F. Soltis (1993) describes the message of the book as follows:

Doll envisions a post-modern curriculum that will allow human powers of creative organization and reorganization of experience to be operative in an environment that maintains a healthy tension between the need to find closure and the desire to explore. Such an open system will allow students and their teachers in conversation and dialogue to create more complex orders and structures of subject matter and ideas than is possible in the closed curriculum structures of today (p. x).

It was evident that Doll, being formerly a mathematics teacher, wanted not only to understand the curriculum but also to develop ideas for instructional practice. Doll pointed out that his aim was not to define curriculum in terms of content or materials but "in terms of process – a process of development, dialogue, inquiry, transformation" (Doll, 1993, p. 13).

Such understanding of education was very much consistent with William Pinar's (1975) conception of curriculum as *currere*, emphasizing the process of "running the course" in which an individual experience of learning and being transformed (p. 13).

With his book, Doll opened a view into the future of curriculum that was fresh and timely concerning the discourses on postmodernity and many new educational challenges. What seemed important to me was Doll's focus on post-modern arts and architecture, with which he elaborated our traditionally fixed views of the world and knowledge. According to him, we needed to be trained in the art of creating and choosing, not just ordering and following (Doll, 1993, p. 8). Retrospectively, Doll's book was also important because it had a lot of ideas for understanding the educational practice, contents of subjects and the learning process itself in a fresh way without referring to discourses in educational psychology, which I was very familiar with at that time.

At the University of Tampere, we were particularly inspired by Doll's theory of post-modernity and its implications for curricula. This resulted in a few publications concerning, for instance, the future of vocational education (Roppo et al., 1995a) and curriculum for lifelong learning (Roppo et al., 1995b). Also, the questions and interests related to teacher identity and identity in general as an educational challenge emerged (see Roppo & Värri, 2003).

My understanding of William Doll's overall contribution to the reconceptualization is that with his writings, he opened many new issues into the

discussion within curriculum theorizing. He not only discussed post-modernity but also the issue of applying foreign and strange concepts, such as the concept of ghosts (Doll, 2002). That idea was published in a book titled *Curriculum Visions*, edited by William Doll and Noel Gough (2002). With ghosts, he referred to external forces like control and haunting work related to curriculum and its development. The concept of a ghost is also applicable to societal and global problems, such as pollution or climate change, that are hard to define and solve (Ropo & Värri, 2019). *Curriculum Visions* also opened many other new issues important for the discourses of education and curricula.

The new century brought new issues under scrutiny and discourse within the loose community of reconceptualization and with those who followed the movement without being associated directly as its proponents. I summarize the development of reconceptualization as focusing first on criticism against the traditional and managerial approaches towards the curricula accepted and applied in US public education. This criticism also raised issues that were omitted from curriculum theorizing, such as autobiographical or gender perspectives.

The second stage in the development of reconceptualization was an effort to understand the political, historical, and scientific roots and origins of curricula. This work was manifested in the grand piece of work by Pinar and his colleagues (1995) in *Understanding Curriculum*. The third phase was to follow with more discussion on the connections between theory and educational practice.

## Reconceptualization in the 21st century

The new century also opened more opportunities for international discourse. The first world conference on curriculum studies was organized in 2003, followed by a second one, three years later, at the University of Tampere. More than 300 participants from all continents came to this event. Selected conference presentations were published in a book in 2009 (see Ropo & Autio, 2009). International conversations on curriculum broadened the topics and issues dealt with by the researchers. Conference presentations dealt with, for instance, such themes as curriculum studies and social future, relations between education and curriculum, international developments in curriculum in different countries and continents, and issues related to identity and subject in the curriculum (Ropo & Autio, 2009).

The second world conference in Tampere also gave a boost for many Finnish scholars to introduce themselves to the theorizing of reconceptualists and those who were interested in participating in the curriculum discourses. In Finland, this kind of research interest was present at the University of Tampere and Åbo



Akademi. The research community is small and has diverse interests concerning curriculum studies. However, there also seems to be a long-term interest among the younger generation of researchers.

Tero Autio was the first doctoral researcher in Finland to make his dissertation on a topic related to reconceptualization. His dissertation was titled ‘Teaching under siege: Beyond the traditional curriculum studies and/or didaktik split’ (Autio, 2002). This thesis also led to Autio’s more extensive and internationally recognized book on subjectivity, curriculum, and society (Autio, 2006). At Tampere University, research on curriculum and curriculum studies issues has taken mostly a contextual approach in which Finnish basic education, teacher education, and curricular issues related to climate change, eco-social philosophy of education, and sustainability have been the main topic areas. (see e.g. Autio et al., 2017; Autio et al., 2019; Hakala & Kujala, 2021; Tervasmäki et al., 2022). My own research has focused on curricula for climate change education and narrativity and narratives of curricula during the last few years (Ropo & Yrjänäinen, 2023).

At the Åbo Akademi, Mikael Uljens and his colleagues have done remarkable research on curriculum theorizing and didactics (see, e.g., Uljens & Ylimaki, 2017; Ylimaki & Uljens, 2017). Uljens is an internationally well-known and recognized researcher of varied curriculum-related issues, such as the non-affirmative theory of education (Uljens, 2023), re-theorizing curriculum research (Uljens, 2018a), and international curriculum reforms (Uljens, 2018b; Hardy & Uljens, 2018; Uljens, 2019).

The world conferences also provoked a new perspective on comparing curriculum histories and traditions, for instance, between Europe, China, and the USA. William Pinar’s topic at the Tampere conference was Bildung and Internationalization of Curriculum Studies (Pinar, 2009). The autobiographical perspective on curriculum was also dealt with from the viewpoint, an emerging theme in the social sciences (c.f. Giddens, 1991; Fukuyama, 2019).

Many interesting publications from international contexts emerged during the next triennial world conferences in South Africa, Brazil, and Canada. On my bookshelf, one of the most read is written by South African researcher Jonathan Jansen (2009), whose book *Knowledge in the Blood* was published just before the Third World Conference in Cape Town. This book dealt with race and South Africa’s apartheid past. Jansen pointed out something very important from the educational point of view. How is it that “white young Afrikaners, born at the time of Mandela’s release from prison, hold firm views about the past they never lived, rigid ideas about black people, and fatalistic thoughts about the future” (Jansen 2009, back cover).

Is this knowledge inherited in the blood, as the title of the book says? The question is important to understand what the learning and teaching process is about and how we can influence its results.

Curriculum discourses are complex or complicated, as William Pinar and many others have emphasized during the years of reconceptualization. This complexity is not only due to the different perspectives with which we may interpret the texts but also the complexity of the interpretations of histories, cultures, and futures of societies and the whole globe. New generations are preparing to live in a world in which everything is in transition from knowledge to our understanding of the world and ourselves as individuals, social communities, and societies. This emerging complexity is a big challenge for curriculum and education.

Within reconceptualization, Henderson and his colleagues (2015) published a book that gave me a very positive feeling about the emerging practicality of theorizing among the movement. William Pinar's comment on this book is somehow historical, "what Henderson provides here is "designed to foster dynamic, engaged student learning" (p. 16). Foster means: 1) to provide a child with care and upbringing, 2) to encourage the development of something, 3) to keep a feeling or thought alive" (Henderson, 2015, p. 16).

Reconceptualization came back to schools, to teachers and students, to provide new insights into classroom practice. Henderson writes about his and his colleagues' purpose as follows:

What is powerfully present is an articulation of our ethical commitment to children, requiring repudiation of "school reform," fore-fronting not tests but our relationships with the students with whom we work. These, Luxon (2013) points out, "are at their best when they draw on those 'practices of self' that educate individuals in a self-authorship resistant to being overwritten by cultural narratives" (Luxon, 2013, p. 8). One such 'practice is the self' is autobiography, embedded in Henderson's invocation of a 'new' and 'integrated individualism,' collaborative curriculum development ('development-from-within), implying the formulation of a revitalized professional identity. ... Another such 'practice' is a dialogical encounter, animated participation in complicated conversation – ethical, intellectual engagement – with others (p. 16).

The curriculum being a "complicated conversation" is not the only perspective reconceptualists have presented. From the very beginning, autobiography and autobiographical analyzes have been present in different forms and ways (see, e.g., Pinar 1994; Miller, 2009). Autobiographical approaches have also taken the form of analyzing curricula from the perspective of identities (Ropo, 2019). This orientation to discuss the importance of identities in education was also evident outside the movement (e.g., Giddens, 1991; Goodson & Walker, 1991).

The third important discourse within the texts of reconceptualists relates to the role of arts in pedagogy and curriculum. This discourse is rooted in texts by many other curriculum theorists, such as Eliot Eisner (1994) to whom Henderson (2015) also refers concerning the nature of teaching. “Teaching is a feeling profession (Noddings, 2003; Palmer, 2007) as well as an artistic one (Eisner, 1994)” (Henderson, 2015, p. 124).

Curriculum may be fixed but teaching should always be based on conversation in which creation and creativity are present. Doll (1993) also emphasized the same message in his post-modern perspective on curriculum. The crucial role of arts in the current, turbulent societal contexts can also be understood from larger and more general perspectives. “Arts is an alarm system of the society” (Achille Bonito Oliva, video interview at the Tallinn KUMU art museum exhibition 2023-4).

The role of arts in societal transformations is often crucial, opening eyes and minds to directions people would not be able to see by themselves. A good example of what arts can be is an excerpt from the KUMU art museum exhibition publication (Helme & Cavallucci, 2023). Referring to the period of 1980s in Estonian art, Helme and Cavallucci (2023) state that “the most important feature of this short period, its value, engine, and heart, was the intense mixing and synthesis of ideas, from metaphysics to anarchism, from rock music to technodelic expressionism” (p. 58).

Jüri Kermik (2018) described the importance of this phenomenon from the point of identity.

Drawing on hybrid activities, which included performance, conceptual art, music, and film, among others, (artists) expressed the identity of the new generation using projects, events, and a highly visible series of exhibitions in which ideas of the city and urban design, interior architecture, product design... were brought together (p. 6).

The purpose of education and curriculum could be expressed with three aims. Firstly, is to engage students in complicated conversations about the subjects and the world around us. Secondly, it might be to enhance students’ growth as persons by engaging them in autobiographical processes. The third point of view suggests that these processes are not possible without artistic imagination and such approaches in pedagogy that enhance understanding of ourselves and others in changing life contexts.

## Concluding comments

With the reconceptualization of the past described briefly above, it is important to direct our perspectives to the future. What does the movement offer for the current discourses on education and its future?

Firstly, reconceptualization has opened new discourses and issues that are evidently important in designing education for the future. After having this huge amount of literature on curriculum, we understand much better how complicated curriculum design is. It should consider the complexities of societies, subjects and disciplines, subjectivity and identity, equity, and equality to serve the future life of people in increasingly complicated life contexts.

Secondly, reconceptualization has offered fresh ideas and solutions for pedagogical practice. Those ideas may still be abstract and general, but they are powerful enough for professionals to understand and apply in different ways in their own teaching and instruction.

And finally, reconceptualization is still a critical movement. It gives a clear message against the simplistic models treating curriculum only as a managerial or technocratic document to be followed by teachers to attain the prescribed, measurable learning objectives.

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