

Theorising Alternative Pathways for Curriculum Theorising in Africa

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Abstract Curriculum study has always been a contested field with alternative notions and understandings of how it should be understood, enacted, evaluated, and how curriculum should reconstitute the happenings in education. Curriculum theorising has the potential to change societies and orchestrate a way forward on a continent plagued by socio-economic and political challenges. However, curriculum theorising on the continent have failed to produce the desired outcome or the solutions which would drive innovation on the content. Curriculum theorising on the continent has been dominated by three approaches structural theorising, generic theorising, and substantive theorising. Prior to articulating new or alternative approaches to theorising curriculum on the African continent, this paper first articulates the existing approaches, giving explanations as to why they are considered insufficient to theorise the African curriculum landscape. Three key approaches that have dominated the African curriculum theorising landscape were discussed, and they include, substantive theorising, structural theorising, and generic theorising. Curriculum theorising in the era of the fourth industrial revolution needs to move away from these traditional approaches of theorising (structural, generic, and substantive theorising), as they can no longer proffer solutions that would address the ever-changing needs of the educational landscape. This study further proposes three alternative approaches to curriculum theorising: contextual theorising, responsive theorising and theoretical theorising. It concludes that these three approaches would work towards contextual relevance and global excellence for the African educational landscape as it pushes to address issues which make for quality education and responsiveness.

Keywords Curriculum, Theorising, Africa, Relevance, Responsiveness

1. Introduction

Curriculum theorising is at the certain of the curriculum discourse especially because it orients curriculum studies and work towards the development of new theory which makes for alternative pathways for curriculum. Curriculum theorising focuses on the process rather than the product thereby ensuring that teaching and learning is productive and responsive in all facets. Schwab (2013) argues that curriculum as a field of discipline is moribund. It is "unable, by its present methods and principles, to continue its work and contribute significantly to the advancement of education. It requires new principles which will generate a new view of the character and variety of its problems. It requires new methods appropriate to the new budget of problems" (Schwab, 2013, p. 591). This situation is worse in Africa where the curriculum stratosphere is simply a mirror of the global north. Schwab further elaborates on the crisis of curriculum studies by pointing out that "the curriculum field has reached this unhappy state by inveterate, unexamined and mistaken reliance on theory. On the one hand, it has adopted theories (from outside the field of education) concerning ethics, knowledge, political and social structure, learning, mind and personality, and has used these borrowed theories theoretically, i.e. as principles from which to 'deduce' right aims and procedures for schools and classrooms. On the other hand,

it has attempted construction of educational theories, particularly theories of curriculum and instruction". This over emphasis on theory rather than theorising has kept the field of curriculum studies stagnant. Wallin (2011, p. 286) confirms this when he argues that "the field of curriculum theorizing has made great strides to multiply the meaning of curriculum, the task of contemporary curriculum theorizing has only begun to imagine a style of thought capable of encountering the curriculum in terms of its un-thought, non-identitarian potentials". This means that curriculum theorising has a lot to offer within the sterile field of curriculum studies as well as finding new paths for the responsiveness of education. In responding to these challenges, Pinar (2008) argues that there is a growing paradigm shift in curriculum studies, in which the primary preoccupation which was curriculum development has been replaced by a multi-discursive academic effort to understand curriculum. These new dimensions of theorising have looked at curriculum theologically, historically, biographically, institutionally, politically, autobiographically, racially, aesthetically, and internationally, as well as in terms of gender, phenomenology, postmodernism, and poststructuralism. Reid (2001) confirmed this when he argued that there is need for a fundamental rethinking of the curriculum field. Whereas this rethinking has been taking shape in the global North as pointed (Deng, 2018) the global south in general and Africa in particular has been left behind. In Africa, Curriculum theory and curriculum theorising all appear to be two sides of the same coin with one focusing on the product and the other focusing on the process leading to the product or the one focusing on the theory developed and the other focusing on the process of theory development rather than the theory itself. This makes curriculum studies as a discipline which transcends these two areas a more nuanced field needing a radical rethinking.

2. Approaches to Curriculum Theorising

Several scholars have articulated different approaches to curriculum theorising in the attempt to rethink the field. Before articulating new or alternative approaches to theorising curriculum on the African continent, it is critical to first of all articulate the existence approaches, explain why these are not sufficient or succinct enough to theorise the African curriculum landscape and why alternative pathways are needed before articulating such pathways. Three key approaches have dominated the African curriculum theorising landscape, and they are, substantive theorising, structural theorising, and generic theorising (Tan, Ponnusamy, & Quek, 2017; Huenecke, 1982).

Structural theorising as articulated by Huenecke (1982) focuses on the interrelationship of curriculum elements and how these elements play out in the

educational discourse. The ultimate in this interrelationship is considered to be the student and his or her abilities and habits of learning. Under such circumstances, the teacher is considered to be the one capable of making the best decisions as far as the learning of the student is concerned (Tan et al., 2017). The student who is the epicenter of this approach to theorising is also seen as having the power to choose from amongst the choices presented to him or her by the teacher and other stake holders dealing with the curriculum. Beyond the student and the interrelationship between different curriculum elements, structural theorising also considers the process of implementing and evaluating curriculum as well as social and cultural values and characteristics which should be inherent in the curriculum. Huenecke (1982) continues that many involved in structural theorising see themselves as scholars engaged in scientific research process that give them the opportunity to be neutral. Though no human activity is neutral, they consider themselves to be more neutral than any other theoriser. Structural theorising often highlights the answers to the questions they seek to answer more than the question they are answering, although the questions and the decisions made to achieve the answer are deeply embedded in their views on learning and education. If the focus of the interrelationship of the curriculum elements is the student for the structural theoriser, it follows that the values, beliefs, and assumptions they consider paramount for upright personas would be at the heart of such theorising. In general, those who focus on curriculum development and the structure of the curriculum base their views on the underlying belief in human rationality since the person is seen as fundamentally a thinking and acting being, it follows that human affairs should be conducted in logical manner where consistency is a major criterion of effectiveness" (Huenecke, 1982, p. 291). It is clear that curriculum at this point is seen as a plan and terminology is crucial necessitating precise definitions, which is meant to guide actions. Under such circumstances, curriculum and instruction are seen as two different elements "whose patterns of complementarity are an important concern" (Huenecke, 1982, p. 291). Structural theorising seeks to therefore put boundaries on the curriculum field and on curriculum development processes to render them more manageable. Huenecke (1982, p. 291) concludes that structural theorising "affirms that educational practice is not an art but is in large part a science, as such all that occurs in the complexity of human learning should be identified, described, and to some extent controlled". This means that a thorough understanding of structural theorising would through more light on 'orderly execution of curriculum planning', a struggling teacher's activities or praxis, and what happens before, during and after teaching and learning takes place in the classroom. An understanding of the interrelationship between these elements would result in the termination of harmful praxis that more often than not result in inappropriate instruction

and unfair assessment.

The place and value of structural theorising in the broader spectrum of curriculum theorising cannot be denied or overemphasized. Its contributions to the process of theorising and in finding better ways of making curriculum development and instruction better achievements which are yet to be matched in the educational landscape. However, on the African continent where the praxis of theorising is still struggling to thrive, theorising on the continent structurally would be problematic in two ways. Firstly, its inability or lack of desire to seek new approaches for curriculum. The African curriculum studies landscape needs to move beyond the theories and theorising perspectives propounded by Europe and the Americas to find new approaches to curriculum which would reorient praxis on the continent and shape education for the better. New approaches to curriculum mean new solutions to the ever-increasing educational crisis in Africa stemming from the ever-changing landscape and the intrusion of neoliberal forces on education in general and curriculum in particular. Secondly, structural theorising seeks to establish boundaries in the field of curriculum. Though every discipline or field requires some boundaries if it is to be called a discipline or field, establishing set boundaries for the field in this era of the fourth industrial revolution where educational skills transcend disciplinary boundaries, establishing boundaries in the field of curriculum which is supposed to ensure interdisciplinarity for all the other disciplines would be problematic. For example, while hard skills are vital for the forging ahead of the nation in this era of the fourth industrial revolution, soft skills are also critical for such workers with hard skills. For such workers to develop the soft skills needed, there is need for some form of interdisciplinarity or transdisciplinarity. A theorising approach which would produce the desired results on the African continent is one that moves away from boundaries and seeks to find new approaches for curriculum on the continent.

The second approach is generic theorising, and this is in sharp contrast to structural theorising. It concerns itself with the outcomes of the curriculum as opposed to the curriculum making or curriculum element focus of structural theorising. Generic theorising seeks to explore the overall effect or experience of school on the person. To these theorists, curriculum is broad and encapsulates the total educational experience on the student. Huenecke (1982, p. 292) contends that these theorists argue that “since much of what is taught is unrecognized (at least by those who are to ‘receive’ the teaching) and may in fact be unintended, the revelation of assumptions, beliefs, and perceived truths underlying decisions of what to teach is of the highest priority. New and usually implicit hypothesis are generated from insights gained from such fields as sociology, anthropology, philosophy and political theory”. By tapping from outside the field of education, generic theorising goes beyond the boundaries initiated by

structural theorising. By using sources outside education, these theories are better able to understand educational processes better and how the student navigates his or her way through the educational landscape. As such, new insight is developed into education practice by drawing on meanings in these disciplines which are otherwise not available to educationist. Curriculum scholars who theorise within this frame are often highly reprovving of present and past formations of curriculum that place limitations on education especially on issues like content, student teacher interaction, and relationship between school or school and society. They theorise to remove boundaries rather than create them as a way of liberating all educationists from prisons of unexamined ideas or presuppositions. They engage curricular matters and charges like anticipation, consciousness, expectation, integration, justice, liberation, and diversity amongst others. Huenecke (1982) argues that there are three basic threats of generic theorising. The first is the general contempt for the reduction of human who is a student to the learner who is a type. Generic theorists see the student as being much more than the man of the curriculum have made him to be. The second is the idea that desirability is determined by values. Whether the curriculum and education are desired or not is a product of the values enshrined in them and how the teacher represents these values. The last thread of generic theorising is the thrust for liberation, liberation within the person and outside the person. This brings to the fore front the idea that schooling, learning and all life’s experiences are unique for every student and how liberating education is for the individual is a function of the dynamics of power, control and influence exerted in the education sphere.

Generic theorising and its preoccupations are at the heart of the education endeavor especially in Africa where liberation and justice are at the core of many educational programs. However, the challenge with generic theorising in Africa is the destruction of boundaries. The complete opening up of the field of curriculum is what has resulted in the need to reclaim the curriculum (Tan et al., 2017). Fomunyam (2014) argues that the field has been overshadowed by every scholar who believes that they can tell the man of the curriculum how to go about his business. With the increasing need for skills development rising in Africa especially in this era of the fourth industrial revolution, there is a strong need for some levels of boundaries within the field. For as Pinar and Addams (2009) put it, disciplinarity is the test our generation must pass.

The third approach to theorising is substantive theorising and those involved in substantive theorising normally do not address structural issues, neither do they concern themselves with the strains of schooling. The focus is often not on what the man of the curriculum hasn’t considered as opposed to what he has. The idea is to find what is more desirable than what already exist, although what is more desirable to one might not be to the other. And since desirability is informed by values and assumptions, these

assumptions and values are an explicit and integral part of theorising. These theorists seek new direction for curriculum as a result of three failures of the current curriculum. The first being failure of relevance. This has been a major issue in African universities in general over the past decade. Recently, the calls for decolonisation of the curriculum took a different turn as a way of ensuring relevance in the curriculum. As Mamdani (2016) argues, the fight for relevance in education on the African continent has been in existence since 1954. The second is being the failure to foster excellence. The struggle on the African continent has always focused on how to ensure relevance and foster excellence at the same time rather than pick one against the other as the debates between Ali Mazrui and Walter Rodney showed (Mamdani, 2016). The final one is being the failure to educate the total person. Fomunyam (2014) argue that most programs don't consider the education of the person as a whole. While some focus on the political dimension of education, some focus on the social, while others yet focus on the economic or political. These three failures necessitated the search for new directions in education by substantive theorists. Substantive theorists always seek to answer the question why are students always taught X, what would happen if they are taught Y or P. Why are schools limited in what they offer? What is the role of the school in educating the whole person? What should students learn today that will prepare them for tomorrow's world? All these are some of the questions substantive theorising seek new insight or answers to.

These three approaches to curriculum theorising structural, generic and substantive all offer interesting angles from which education in general and curriculum in particular can be viewed. They explore the subject of curriculum extensively but leave a lot wanting as far as Africa is concerned. The challenges pointed out in these approaches to theorising specifically on the African continent make it difficult for the propagation of educational solutions which would meet the needs of the society. Without alternative approaches to curriculum theorising on the African continent the nations' vision for education would never be realized because such theorising would be producing solutions that are foreign to the people because of its approach to the problem. This paper seeks to provide three alternative approaches to curriculum theorising which would engage educational issues on the continent in the bid to generate theories which would solve the educational challenges on the continent. These are contextual theorising, responsive theorising and theoretical theorising. These three are explored in detail in this paper.

3. Contextual Theorising

Education doesn't take place in a vacuum but is rather oriented by the contextual realities of the nation or place

where the institution is located. Weenie (2008, p. 547) argues that "a historical consideration of curriculum, or an accounting of how certain knowledge has been given credence, is essential to curricular theorizing. The story of curriculum as a 'grand narrative' or 'collectivestory' will encompass an array of philosophical views that serve as foundations for how knowledge making came to be structured. The story begins and is predicated by the Western male theorists, the canons of knowledge like Dewey and Tyler, whose ideas permeated traditional curriculum. They conceptualized what is commonly referred to as the technical-rational or factory model, wherein curriculum was designed to create an efficient and scientifically oriented society. Radical theorists like McLaren and Giroux examined 'relations of dominations', and their ideas, along with feminist discourses, precipitated their conceptualization era". This means that for proffered solutions to make meaning in a particular place, the context must be taken into consideration. Contextual theorising is key to relevance in theorising especially because the focus of curriculum theorising is not on the product but on the process leading to the product. If the process is faulty, it follows that the product will be faulty. Contextual theorising opens up the conversation and locates it within the context and ensures that the rudiments of the context informs the process of theorising, thereby ensuring that nothing is left to chance but everything that makes for relevance is prioritized. Since theorising focuses on the continuous process of formulating various conceptions of curriculum, engaging in such a process without the consciousness of the context would not yield any tangible solution for the academic challenges facing the context for which the theorising is supposed to produce or lead to solutions. Contextual theorising from this standpoint becomes a creative intellectual task and process wherein the theoriser seeks solutions to practical problems within a particular setting for "curriculum work in all its manifestations is not a 'science' that yields universally agreed upon content and or solutions similarly designed for all" (Miller, 2014, p. 14). Since curriculum solutions are not one size fit all, contextual theorising offers a better approach to theorising in the bid to seek out new solutions to old problems as well as the numerous issues emerging daily from the education landscape.

Apple (2018, p. 1) argues that there is need for theorists to "pay greater attention to the politics of education and to writing in a way that makes one's arguments more accessible to the reader. In another way, however, it is important to realize that reality is very complicated, as are the relations of dominance and subordination that organize it. Sometimes understanding these relations requires that we develop a new language that may seem uncomfortable when first tried out. Learning how to use this set of concepts to look anew at our daily lives will take hard work, but it may in fact be necessary if we are to make head way in recognizing (rather than our all too usual misrecognizing)

the contradictory ways education functions in our society". Since education in general and curriculum in particular is neither static nor straight forward but operates in contradictory ways, such contradictions themselves are influenced by different factors in the area where such education is offered. To proffer effective solutions to these contradictions and chart a path forward for curriculum conversations in particular and education in general, such theorising must be contextual in nature.

4. Responsive Theorising

Responsiveness is at the heart of curriculum relevance, as well as the drive by education to achieve its purpose. There are four dimensions of responsiveness in curriculum: disciplinary responsiveness, pedagogic responsiveness, cultural responsiveness and economic responsiveness (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017). They continue that curriculum responsiveness in particular and educational responsiveness in general is the pathways through the countless education challenges ravaging the education system can be solved. Morrison (2007) confirms this when he posits that curriculum discourses should be marked by a multiplicity of voices, articulating a hundred thousand theories thereby creating avenues for curriculum pathways that are responsive. This curriculum is only possible in spaces that are open to construction and reconstruction of responsive knowledge. To enhance the responsiveness of the curriculum, this curriculum theorists need to start experimenting with responsive theorising to produce voices that matter in the theorisation process in the bid to create sustainable and socially just spaces wherein caring and just curriculum encounters can take place. Fomunyam and Teferra (2017) argue that curriculum encounters are shaped by power dynamics in educational spaces, which necessitate the rise of plurality of voices which in themselves provoke the creation of disciplinary and interdisciplinary spaces for curriculum engagement and sustainable education powered by plurality, which in itself is shaped by curricular charges. As such responsive theorising would take the curriculum theorising process a step further by ensuring that any engagement with the educational process is one that would proffer practical solutions to the numerous education challenges, especially on the African continent. This is vital because theorising in the sphere have either focused on generic theorising or substantive theorising while others have also focused on structural theorising. While these are important, much more important is the responsiveness of educational endeavours as curriculum praxis strives to improve the quality of education. Theorising on the paths of economic responsiveness would ensure that the solutions of theories developed to address the educational challenges offer value for money and the students who go through such education are able to create jobs for themselves upon graduation or

find gainful employment. Also, theorising on the paths of disciplinary responsiveness would ensure fitness for purpose which makes for relevance and excellence. Also theorising on the path of cultural and pedagogic responsiveness would ensure that the process of theorising focuses on everything that concerns and influences education, thereby ensuring the responsiveness of such educational endeavours.

Forsberg (2007) argues that theorising should raise questions on the kind of knowledge that counts, knowledge selection and its consequences. This being fundamental in any educational program speaks to the need for responsive theorising as the answers to these questions would ensure responsiveness within the program as well as for the students participating in it. As such, moving beyond whose knowledge to responsive knowledge is at the heart or should be at the heart of curriculum theorising. Knowledge is made up of symbols and these symbols convey meaning some of which are pedagogically responsive, while others would be contextual responsiveness. Theorising the nature of knowledge to understand which symbols responsive and which ones are not so as to ensure that education focuses on the responsive ones is the ultimate goal of responsiveness theorising (Wallin, 2011). Such functions of curriculum can only be engaged effectively through responsive theorising.

5. Theoretical Theorising

Theory is the focal point of all educational experiences especially because it seeks to provide solutions to education challenges thereby enhancing the educational experience. Theory is the foundation of educational relevance and success and if curriculum theorists on the African continent are going to lead the education stratosphere into an era of contextual relevance and global excellence, theoretical theorising is key. Miller (2014, p. 13) argues that Curriculum theory always is 'here' in all aspects of educating, whether acknowledged or not. We are always interpreting from particular epistemological and ontological assumptions about the nature of being- the 'self'- as well as about knowledge and its productions and constructions. So, I am uncomfortable with any sole notion of curriculum theory- there is no one theory of curriculum that provides the overarching scope of power or level of generalization that positivist connotations of theory imply... I will prefer ...curriculum theorising where the word theorising is consciously chosen to signal the never ending process of thinking, imagining, positing, reconsidering, reinterpreting and envisaging anew various situated and continent conceptions of curriculum and their obvious and inextricably intertwined relations to teaching and learning... From a conceptual perspective, curriculum work in all of its manifestations is not a science that yields universally agreed upon content similarly designed and

developed for all. Instead, ongoing revisions of what and who might constitute conceptions of curriculum in any one education setting all are part of the complicated conversation that is curriculum.

This shows the place of theory and theorising in education and its criticality in ensuring relevance. Theoretical theorising would move beyond theory development or the continuous process of thinking, imagining, and positing new ways of understanding curriculum to a more nuanced approach of theory theorisation, exploring the trustworthiness of theory development process and the theories produced from such processes as a way of understanding the failures of current curriculum theory to fully address the educational challenges on the continent. Linné (2015, p. 31) adding to this argues that “choosing a curriculum-theory perspective as the point of departure for educational research means questioning how knowledge transmitted in an educational context is selected, valued and organized and how such processes can be understood. It means being curious about what kind of knowledge is at stake, its possible content and how transmission and valuation take shape. It means seeing the curriculum question as a problem. Thereafter, however, different leads may be followed”. Seeing the problem has never been a problem for curriculum theorising neither has developing theories to address these problems. However, with the failure of these theories to produce the desired effect, questions are raised on the validity of these theories and the understandings of the problems. Theoretical theorising would be seeking new ways of understanding the failures to fully comprehend the problem as well the failures of the solutions provided to address the challenges. Rabinow (2009, p. 3) argues that “knowledge is conceptual because without concepts one would not know what to think about or where to look in the world. It is political because reflection is made possible by the social conditions that enable this practice (though it may be singular, it is not individual). It is ethical because the question of why and how to think are questions of what is good in life. Finally, all action is stylized, hence it is aesthetic, insofar as it is shaped and presented to others”. Knowledge as such and the theories of knowledge provide schema to the general understandings on the workings of knowledge but theoretical theorising seeks to move beyond these general understandings to theorise curriculum knowledge as embedded in curriculum theory and the process of theory generation as well as the theory of theories, the failures of theories and the value of relevant curriculum theory in the strive for contextual relevance and global excellence.

Morrison (2007) and Fomunyan (2014) argue that curriculum theorising should be marked by depth, diversity, conflicting voices, productiveness, diverse philosophies and theories and the basis for this should be mankind in a hundred thousand context. This continuous process of theorising makes for a conflux of ideas approaches, voices, meanings amongst others which needs to be brought

together through the lens of theoretical theorising. Theoretical theorising taking into consideration through the theorisation of theories, theory generation, theory validity and effectiveness would provide a new lens for looking into reality and ensuring that the solutions provided become responsive and relevant. With theoretical theorising curriculum theory would be re-oriented to produce key constructs that would make for contextual relevance and global excellence. Theorising from the lens of theoretical theorising would ensure that theorists produce theories that can truly address the educational challenges facing the continent.

6. Conclusions

Curriculum theorising in the era of the fourth industrial revolution needs to move away from the traditional approaches of theorising; structural theorising, generic theorising, and substantive theorising. These approaches to theorising though useful, can no longer proffer solutions which would address the ever-changing needs of the educational landscape. While structural theorising focuses on the interrelationship of curriculum elements and how these elements play out in the educational discourse especially the interrelationship between student and his or her abilities and habits of learning, generic theorising on the other hand concerns itself with the outcomes of the curriculum as opposed to the curriculum making or curriculum element focus of structural theorising, especially because it seeks to explore the overall effect or experience of school on the person. Substantive theorising on its part generally does not address structural issues nor do they concern themselves with the ills of schooling. The focus is often not on what the man of the curriculum has not considered as opposed to what he has. These three approaches which have informed curriculum theorising is no longer capable of providing the kind of solutions the African continent needs to move forward especially in this era of the fourth industrial revolution where skills development is paramount and educational innovation the desire of all nations. If Africa is to be key player in the fourth industrial revolution curriculum theorising must re-orient to produce educational solutions that address the challenges of quality and the failing educational systems on the continent. It should be able to create the enable circumstances and solutions that would produce contextual relevance in education and echo global responsiveness.

Contextual theorising, responsive theorising and theoretical theorising should be the new normal for curriculum theorists who truly what to produce the desired change through the process of their theorising. There can never be relevance without responsiveness and for responsiveness to be of any effect, it must consider the context where such responsiveness is being measured. Contextual theorising alongside responsive theorising

would create room for a consideration of both the context and the process of responsiveness which makes for relevance on the continent and project global excellence through the products that would emerge from the innovations which previously had been hindered by insolvent challenges in the education system.

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