

Evolution of Curriculum Standards: A Comprehensive Review of Historical Development

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Abstract

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of curriculum standards in higher education, employing a theoretical taxonomy to evaluate key empirical research over the past thirty years. It meticulously examines the evolution of curricular standards, outlining their influence on curriculum development, academic standards, quality assurance, and the creation and control of curriculum. The article outlines the historical factors that have influenced curricular standards, highlighting the impact of economic, political, and social issues. It points out problems and gaps in previous research, mainly when it comes to the historical development of curriculum assessment, and gives a full assessment of earlier studies. A significant issue is the prevalence of economic and political ideas. These things might get in the way of the learning goals of curriculum standards and push a test-based approach that goes against basic educational principles. The essay analyzes the future of curricular standards, highlighting issues such as the impact of technology on assessments, the changing role of educators, and the need for new curriculum design. Evaluation procedures view technology as a revolutionary influence. This process includes computer-adaptive testing, automated scoring, and ensuring alignment with evolving content standards. The essay then calls for more communication between academics, politicians, and teachers in order to set useful, fact-based standards that align local government with the need for educational reform. This underscores the need to address unsolved disagreements and research deficiencies in the discourse surrounding curricular standards.

Keywords: *Curriculum standard, Adaptation, Connection, Mutability, Pedagogization, Education*

1. Introduction

The present article presents a theoretically informed taxonomy of the curriculum standards literature and, using this taxonomy undertakes a systematic review of several empirical studies of curriculum standards in higher education settings. Drawing on the last 30 years of research literature, the main literature on curriculum standards critically was mapped and reviewed. By doing so, curriculum standards cross streams of curriculum research, including curriculum development, curriculum and society, academic standards, quality assurance demonstrated, and ways that curriculum was constructed and controlled. The article compares and contrasts findings, considers gaps and weaknesses in the literature, and ends with discussions of patterns emerging. In the last century, scholars have documented development and change in practices designed to control and assess the curriculum taught in the system of higher education (Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020). Historical developments have largely been missing from previous attempts to systematically review the assessment of the college and university-taught curriculum (Borokhovski et al., 2020). Building on this historical context, the article delves into the foundational forces that have shaped curriculum standards, highlighting key influences such as political, economic, and social factors that have driven curriculum development over time.

2. Conceptual Framework of Literature

2.1 Historical Foundations of Curriculum Standards

Numerous historical forces have influenced the development of curriculum standards (Li & Chen, 2017). The contemporary focus on curriculum predates the concept itself by a minimum of 300 years (Paraskeva, 2021). Consequently, the majority of early curriculum standards just represent the scope and sequencing of subject matter domains (McLachlan et al., 2018). The concept of the common school primarily denotes the standardization of educational expectations via a uniform, validated curriculum for all, mirroring the historical focus on universal access to education (Roehrig et al., 2021). During that period, Simanjuntak et al. (2022) identified three primary external influences that significantly contributed to the growth of the curriculum. A significant factor is the swift expansion of newly established Western states in the United States, which necessitated a common educational system to unify the diverse populations of these states while still affirming their distinctiveness (Jakovljevic et al., 2021). The progress and increasing affluence of the United States compelled companies to delineate

job experience primarily in terms of abilities, knowledge, and attitudes (Toffler, 2022).

Economic and political forces have consistently been the primary determinants of the basic curricular standards (Schofer et al., 2021; Zapp & Lerch, 2020). To achieve enduring success, the diverse range of individual educational demands must be seamlessly integrated (Felten & Lambert, 2020). During this period, they established a foundational curriculum, Khalil et al. (2020) noted that as available options begin to diverge, mass society regulates itself into a distinct array of behaviors, with the property-owning middle class distinguishing itself from its impoverished non-owning counterparts. To address such wants and perpetuate the separation process, property economies, and societies undergo further regulation. The following table delineates the identified stages of the progression of curriculum standards, based on an analysis of several papers concerning curriculum and related disciplines.

Table 1 Perceived Stages of Evolution of Curriculum Standards

No.	Periods	Brief Explanation
1	Ancient Education Systems	Early educational systems were based on oral traditions and apprenticeships, focusing on basic literacy and trade skills.
2	Medieval and Renaissance Education	Education focused on classical texts and religious instruction, with an emphasis on grammar, rhetoric, and logic.
3	The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution	Rise of formalized curricula emphasizing science, mathematics, and critical thinking, driven by societal change and industrialization.
4	Modern Education Systems	Standardized curricula emerge, with a focus on broad education for the masses, including compulsory schooling.
5	The Rise of National Education Systems	Governments take an active role in defining national educational curricula, emphasizing uniformity and state-controlled education.

6	The Impact of World Wars and Globalization	Curriculum development was influenced by global conflicts and international movements, focusing on citizenship, democracy, and global cooperation.
7	Emergence of Curriculum Standards	Formalization of curriculum standards to ensure consistency and quality, marking a shift toward measurable educational outcomes.
8	Early 20th Century Developments	Development of standardized testing and the integration of curriculum standards with assessment practices, focusing on efficiency.
9	Mid to Late 20th Century Innovations	Introduction of progressive educational theories, technology integration, and diversification of curriculum standards to cater to different learning needs.
10	Contemporary Curriculum Standards	Current trends emphasize competency-based education, standardized assessments, and integration of global educational frameworks.
11	Future Directions in Curriculum Standards	Exploration of flexible, personalized curricula, driven by technology, and addressing global challenges like equity and sustainability.

Table 1 delineates the principal phases in the development of curricular standards, commencing with ancient systems centered on oral traditions and apprenticeships, progressing to the emergence of national education systems, and the impact of global occurrences such as the World Wars. It chronicles the establishment of curricular standards in the 20th century, highlighting standardized assessment, curriculum efficacy, and innovation. Current standards emphasize competency-based education, with future trends indicating a shift toward tailored curricula and technology-driven reforms to tackle global concerns. Each phase illustrates changes in educational priorities influenced by societal, political, and technical factors.

A. Ancient Education Systems

Martinez (2022) noted that in several ancient cultures, curriculum standards featured a core curriculum, the higher levels of which were studied by very few students. This core curriculum was a complex body of knowledge

concentrated on reading and writing, with the noted exception of oral training in ancient Sparta. According to Kim (2020), each curriculum was designed to foster the values and central ideas of the culture, a goal compatible with such limited participation. Rapanta et al. (2021) also revealed that the Hebrew system sought to develop wisdom and faith, while the Spartan curriculum sought the military virtues of power and discipline, and the students' limitations were suited to the development of these needs. The Greek program, the basis for much of Western civilization's curriculum, taught reading, writing, speaking, and listening to prepare the mind for an ethical, intelligent, and productive life as a citizen. Nokes (2022) further noticed that these values were pursued in a system that minimized occupational and commercial knowledge while striving to identify the abilities of outstanding students and cultivate the discovery of truth, intelligence, emotion, and imagination. In sharp contrast to the pattern introduced in Late Antiquity, the ancient Roman curriculum espoused certain traditional virtues while focusing on the acquisition of practical abilities such as reading, writing, mathematics, and public speaking.

b. Medieval and Renaissance Education

In the Western academic tradition, medieval universities usually included two different curricula or faculties (Ruano-Borbalan, 2022). The lower faculty (the faculty of arts) was preparatory and taught the seven liberal 'arts' or subjects that were drawn from the church fathers and which were vital for the effective training of the intellect. Many techniques of scholastic disputation were aimed at developing the ability to articulate reasoning for the discussion of church articles using techniques for disputation and rhetoric, according to Che et al. (2023). It has been highlighted that since the 'nominalist threat,' realist philosophers tried to demonstrate a new connection between parts of speech and theological meaning. The higher faculty educated the clergy with ten years of theological studies (in which moral philosophy was featured), as noted by Cadge et al. (2020). Shaheen et al. (2021) and Thalén and Carlsson (2020) noted that there was no tension between including secular subjects in the preparatory curriculum and providing higher education in philosophy and moral theology in the three years of magisterial studies toward the priesthood, as it was consistent with the Christian worldview to consider the system as a way to summarize the elements of a Christian doctrine of reason, which was close to the *Via Hebraeica*.

c. The Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution

During this period, educational programs prioritized the liberal arts, classical studies, rhetoric, and logic. The European curriculum mostly retained the Greek emphasis on the trivium and quadrivium, albeit with the integration of a more religious context (Flinders & Thornton, 2021). The curriculum for early American common schools post-Revolutionary War was a streamlined extension of the English model, encompassing language, rhetoric, dialectic, mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy (Abbott, 2020). By the mid-19th century, there was a push for the incorporation of vocational education in schools, proposing that an effective educational institution should integrate fundamental academic subjects with practical training in workshops and agriculture. Conversely, other reformers advocated for students to engage with scientific disciplines, including natural sciences, chemistry, and geology, according to Givens and Ison (2023).

Zimmerman (2022) noted that the recommendations of these reformers would form a nucleus for the first state curriculum movement in Massachusetts. Just after the Civil War, Massachusetts legislated a system of free public high schools, each offering the same curriculum based on the classic and college-centered course of study. According to Poetter et al. (2022), this was subsequently followed by professional curriculum writing groups, which bundled the ideas of various leading academicians of the society with the existing college curriculum in mind. Senk and Thompson (2020) and Simanjuntak et al. (2022), the famous reports were one of the early versions of such expert curriculum policy writing practices in the United States focused on the organization of curricula and standards of high schools. The purpose of the reports was to ameliorate the eclectic and fragmentary organizational structure of high school curricula at the time.

3. Critical Arguments

3.1 Modern Education Systems

The process of establishing modern education systems was closely linked to nation-building. Established in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, European education systems were built on the political and geographical considerations of the time, based on Acosta (2021). The model was then universalized, with or without adjustments, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. New colonies in Africa, North America, South America, the Middle East, and Asia were compelled to adopt and develop education systems by former powers. Epitomized by open competition in military empire-building, the influence was publicly declared and supported by military, commercial, religious, and cultural means, as noted by Gandhi et al. (2020). The major

colonial and linguistic backgrounds at the time were Latin, Germanic, and Soviet. The respective European education systems became anchor models—emulating, if not defaulting to, the colonies placed under their influence (Woldegiorgis, 2021).

The nation-building orientation is very important, as both the military and economic power of the state were highly dependent upon the results of the education system (Yengoyan, 2023). The elaborate organization and infrastructure were often considered large enough for an effective and permanent future, without further investment or adjustment (Hameiri & Jones, 2024). However, a comparison of the historical facts with the concurrent intention to form a learned elite always creates a considerable discrepancy. Since ancient times, an education system intending to serve the state itself and not the population has been revealed to be less efficient and effective and less responsive to innovation, according to Liu et al. (2020). Cheung (2021) revealed that such a national defense system brings with it the weakness of rigidity, inadequate performance, and unrestricted obedience. Instead of advancing viable and productive members, it may well produce a sluggish elite that could block legitimate change and academic advances in knowledge.

A. The Rise of National Education Systems

As the nation-state rose to prominence throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, many nations began to develop national education systems. Often fueled by a desire to create loyal citizens, these systems played a fundamental role in fostering national identity (De Wit & Merckx, 2022). Yet, in becoming national systems, these models also created a significant level of consistency within countries. Formal education had almost always been placed to some collective or national purpose. This was rooted not just in practical shifts toward a school organization of society, but in more complex ideologies that linked the spread of mass schooling and the national state (Tröhler, 2020). As a consequence of this mass education, uniformity across educational systems began to rise within each nation (Holmes, 2022).

Guided by strong national beliefs, nations began to take a more active role in promoting and enforcing educational standards. Conflicts and discrepancies over what should be taught in schools helped create a more formalized and enforced set of standards (Sahlberg, 2021). These national education systems played a foundational role in eliminating the once broad spectrum of education that was offered within nations (Rall et al., 2022). Politically speaking, a convincing argument can be made that the development of national education systems played an important role in the

elimination of diversity within our American education system. By endorsing compulsory education and designing a system around reading, writing, and arithmetic, these countries began to shape the educational landscape into what we know it to be today (Baltodano, 2023).

B. The Impact of World Wars and Globalization

The rise of the United States as an industrial power at the turn of the century and its engagement in World War I fundamentally transformed U.S. life and education. A transformation in education during this time led to fewer people being prepared for the practice of occupation and greater academic preparation for the few who pursued higher learning (Schofer et al., 2021). Schooling for citizenship and the cultivation of democratic values once again became a focus of the curriculum. Support for the war became the rationale for states to strengthen their abilities to police students and teachers, and the conflict further accelerated the influx of people to the cities and changes in jobs and manufacturing (Kołczyńska, 2020).

Requirements of industrialization, urbanization, and war soon came into conflict with each other. As an emerging industrial nation, the United States had to organize its production schedules globally. So too, the nation had to educate its own citizens or immigrant children who were so diverse from each other under the common banner of American citizenship (Colbern & Ramakrishnan, 2020; Westheimer, 2024). Ideas developed about how best to deal with these conflicting goals, yet little was known about their practical results or when they should take place. Nevertheless, we have an interest in the evolving fallout engendered from these early efforts to standardize what every child should study (Kraft, 2020; Kubiszyn & Borich, 2024).

3.2 EMERGENCE OF CURRICULUM STANDARDS

The United States has experienced three major movements concerning more formal attempts to specify the content and learning objectives for schools or the curricula students should experience (Drake & Reid, 2020). In keeping with the earlier discussion, it should be noted that national curricular movements were initiated during the first two and last two decades of the present century. The first and last movements have largely dealt with the cognitive aspect of the curriculum - a concern for specifying knowledge that should be learned - hence the lesser significance and usage of the term curriculum standard (Russell, 2020).

While there have been many lengthy debates about the efficacy of the various curriculum standards and guides that have been developed to date, the literature is nonetheless conspicuously void of investigations of the precipitants, antecedents, attributes, essential features, and indicators of

useful curriculum standards for schools and the roles of the stakeholders in their development, adoption, use, and revision (Mandinach & Schildkamp, 2021). It can be questioned why, in the late 20th century and despite investments of staggering amounts of scarce resources in the production and adoption of official statements and plans of what students should learn so little research has been carried out about these documents from the perspective of their embeddedness in larger educational enterprises, and the extent to which various actors and agencies take part in the making of and discuss what relevance the curriculum standards have to society (De Wit & Altbach, 2021). Because curriculum standards are viewed independently and uncontroversially by some as straightforward specifications of what makes up powerful knowledge, the difficulty is in admitting to the inconsistencies, necessary complexity, degrees of subjectivity, and hidden dimensions of the process of making curriculum standards and determining how they can be taken into account (Hodson, 2020). Given the growing interest in attending to their intended effects in ensuring consistent high-quality education, this chapter begins with a description of laboratory standards, a form of standards that are less costly to develop and seemingly less contentious to establish. After pointing out some of the hidden implications of adopting curriculum standards, it discusses several essential aspects of curriculum standards and implications about the potential barriers to implementing curriculum decisions. It concludes that knowledge is not all that should be known. The specifications for ensuring learning and use of knowledge also have to be considered (Creager, 2021).

A. Early 20th Century Developments

Historical accounts of the development of the American curriculum suggest that little happened in the early 20th century. The few regulations that did exist were largely administrative, mainly aimed at helping the teacher by standardizing the order of subjects or by situating the courses against the examination timetable (Rudolph, 2021). New York and Massachusetts have been mentioned as forerunners. At the time the first standardized examinations were established, it was decided that progress in elementary education could never be made so long as there was chaos then existing concerning the preparation for the examination (Ravitch et al., 2022). To eliminate this confusion, applications for admission to the examination were classified under general headings; then these groups of studies, and finally the subjects were classified. Two years were allowed for these arrangements to be carried out (Ravitch et al., 2022).

In New York State, a standardized course in Regent's examination subjects was first advanced in a pamphlet. In 1941, approximately one-fifth to one-fourth of the states mentioned had some state legislation aimed at unifying the course of study for secondary schools (Stole, 2021). In sum, no state on the Pacific Coast, in the Mountain States, or the territories then organized as Wyoming, New Mexico, or Arizona had any state laws of this sort, nor did any of the newer states of the North or North Central portions of the United States (Volansky, 2023). The states with laws of this type more nearly formed two units. First, we have the New England, Eastern, and Middle Atlantic States, plus Kansas and Kentucky, about them. The other members of the Middle West, plus Illinois, served as an approximation of a second unit of the same kind (McEvoy, 2022).

b. Mid to Late 20th Century Innovations

Following the demise of the Unit Idea curriculum task force, the 1950s through the early 1960s contained a notable lack of explicit, written recommendations for what school subjects should or should not be included as a part of the high school program of studies. Similarly, there was little research that even tried to describe the program then actually in existence (Fensham, 2022). Parallel findings have been made in studies of actual secondary curriculum listings. That is the lack of concerted pressure to limit the high school curriculum, other than in the Improvement Program stimulating curriculum consolidation and in the program of school accountability focused on basic knowledge within the fields of science, English, and social studies, seems to have greatly contributed to the sharp expansion in offerings (Qiao et al., 2024). During the mid-1960s, the often-exclusive preoccupation with purely school outcomes and a lack of actual content subject focus was reversed. This reversal was fueled by a greatly enhanced interest in content area curriculum development. The surge occurred both on the part of state and city education governing bodies initiating some sort of plan for a core curriculum for the often-over-bloated high school program or toward actual positive course curriculum construction efforts by teachers (Henrekson & Wennström, 2022). There were now a dozen significant studies with specific affirmative program directions being put forward. These developments suggested that a body of content fields would or could be embraced and supported and, consequently, that pupils would or could be exposed to them. In other words, the rush during the 1960s was not simply toward better secondary programs. Rather, the rush was given great impetus by the desire to make available and implement programs comprising specific subject matter within those areas

traditionally considered to be foundations in various university programs (Mandler, 2020).

3.3 CONTEMPORARY CURRICULUM STANDARDS

As we write about contemporary curriculum standards, we do so with a sense of irony—for in over ten years of work on the project, we quickly encountered the problem that a consideration of the set of current curriculum standards will be outdated soon after set in print. Since the 19th century, curriculum has been conceptualized by educators as a set of planned arrangements of resources and strategies for obtaining purposes of schooling (Gouëdard et al., 2020). These purposes are influenced by social and political factors. Specifically, certain groups of people want and need a curriculum that serves certain interests. In most democratic nations, educators, acting as public citizens, historically have met regularly to articulate consensus, arrive at public governance, and hold public trust to propose purposes for their nation and suggest means to achieve those purposes (Paraskeva, 2021).

The US public school curriculum typically has been designed along four related strands, including the curriculum-in-action, or textbooks and other materials designed to carry out national and state curriculum standards in classrooms; suggested reading lists; national competitive content in the disciplines; and localized curricular decisions that usually supplement broad content requirements (Park et al., 2020). Each occurs in the context of philological, professional, and operational quarters in the nation. Such standards are like guideposts. While they do not tell us where to go, they do tell us where certain people have traveled, the destinations of some people to whom we give authority, and the importance of valuing that journey. Such standards are important reminders of the need for varied perspectives in the life of a nation built upon the principles of a republic (Johnson et al., 2023).

3.4 FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN CURRICULUM STANDARDS

Our review identified significant challenges and concerns in curriculum standards. The discourse among educators is influenced, and sometimes dominated, by economic or political ideologies that elevate certain educational goals at the expense of others. Access to educational opportunities promised in standards has not been realized (Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020). Political demands for higher test scores and economic competitiveness have resulted in test-driven schooling versus a well-rounded education, which ultimately could threaten our democracy (Fensham, 2022; Martinez, 2022). The local professional discretion of educators and schools has been eroded, not enhanced, leading to difficulties

in implementing the standards defined within traditional standards-based reform frameworks. Many educators are challenged with the fidelity of implementing rich, high-quality curriculum experiences for students (Simanjuntak et al., 2022; Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020). Teachers struggle to incorporate feasible instructional strategies, teaching resources, and assessments to address multiple learning needs while keeping students engaged and maintaining motivation for the learning objectives. While daunting, challenges and concerns also provide opportunities to redefine, innovate, and evolve curriculum design standards (Roehrig et al., 2021). Tasks for educators may include working within current standards-based systems. Larger questions are also signaled, and such questions may receive attention through shifts from traditional education to redefined learning settings (Poetter et al., 2022). Other important questions will need to be targeted by implementing competent, popular alternatives. Below are some future directions to a set of questions that take the form of tasks to meet current standards demands as well as novel ideas to redefine a curriculum through a set of three promising philosophical, theoretical, and empirical evolutionary areas (Hodson, 2020; McGuinness, 2023; Tasdemir & Gazo, 2020).

The impact of technology on assessments is less clear. The changing role of professionals and the increasing infusion of technology need to be considered in credentialing requirements (Martinez, 2022). Traditional licensure examinations are affected by recently occurring advancements in computerization, examination development, and future test administration. The infusion of new technologies in the process and the delivery method of high-stakes accountability examinations enable new question formats, integrated cut scores, a more trusting, efficient, coherent test design with computer-adaptive testing, and reverse accommodations (Fensham, 2022). These technological advancements genuinely represent a long-overdue and significant paradigm shift that would substantially reduce the available anxiety and validity threats associated with high-stakes licensure examinations (Pluim et al., 2020).

From a practical perspective, the latest advancements in automated scoring systems can be applied to create online assessment items across grade levels and subjects that are both aligned with standards and meet the new content expectations that could formally assess college and career readiness skills (Rapanta et al., 2021; Tröhler, 2020). That is, one was able to use technology to transform assessment policy into reality. For example, innovative designs in the fields of science and mathematics, and both the items and the aligned

student responses succeed in assessing students' content understanding and mathematical and verbal communication skills as they relate to academic and workforce-related activities (Rall et al., 2022; Roehrig et al., 2021). Before questions that focus on computer-authored prompts and student-generated responses, technology can be used to normalize or obviate the need for captive conditions (Drake & Reid, 2020; Russell, 2020).

4. Conclusion

Last, but not least, this article thoroughly examines the progression of curriculum standards in higher education, detailing significant research over the past 30 years. It emphasizes the intersections of curriculum development, academic standards, and quality assurance while correcting deficiencies in historical study. The study highlights the significant impact of political, economic, and social variables on curricular practices and advocates for deeper investigation of these influences to improve the comprehension and application of curriculum standards moving forward. Future studies should investigate the impact of emerging technologies on curriculum standards and assessment, incorporate diverse global perspectives to promote inclusivity, and facilitate dialogue among policymakers, educators, and researchers to establish adaptable, evidence-based standards that uphold local autonomy and global educational goals.

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