

third edition

CONTENT- BASED CURRICULUM for high-ability learners

edited by

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Introduction to *Content-Based Curriculum* (3rd ed.)

Joyce VanTassel-Baska

Any book on curriculum has to begin at the beginning with respect to the beliefs and values that drive curriculum decisions. It has to provide a reasonable explanation of how curriculum has come to be interpreted in schools, the major ideas about what curriculum should be, and the key figures who have explicated them. Because this is also a book on curriculum for the gifted, it has to provide some explanation of existing approaches to curriculum development for that special population and how the Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM), used to frame this book, fits into the larger schema.

Philosophies of Curriculum

The world of schooling presents very different orientations to thinking about what matters in curriculum. Although the standards movement has attempted to answer the question about which philosophies of schooling matter, in reality the standards may only serve to confuse the issue, because they represent multiple perspectives themselves—which suggests that the philosophies are compatible at some level and helpful in deliberating on curriculum decisions for any special population. Yet no particular philosophy is so distinctive as to hold sway over the entire enterprise for long. Table 0.1 presents five curriculum paradigms with their ontology, epistemology, methodology, axiology, and leading influential thinkers.

These philosophies have affected how we have defined what curriculum is and how we organize and deliver such curriculum to learners, based on our conceptions about reality. Each perspective has enjoyed a central place in our thinking about what curriculum should be in schools. However, the dominant approach over the past 50 years has remained one of thinking about learning as mastery and assessing groups of learners based on age and grade level in core domains to judge their ability to show mastery in those areas. This view is best seen in our interest in curriculum standards and assessments, tied to a notion of 9 months in school equaling 9 months of learning. As long as this view of curriculum dominates, it is difficult to allow other views to be present, let alone to lead in informing practice.

Within domains of learning, the academic rationalist perspective holds some salience, with acknowledgement of quality content indicators, higher level skill emphases, and the understanding and valuing of concepts central to the discipline and to other related disciplines as well. In our efforts to adopt new views of curriculum, we have also acknowledged brain research and its impact in thinking about curriculum approaches, acknowledging the individual as the unit of analysis for real learning, suggesting that individual differences need to prevail in how we structure and revise curriculum pathways for learning. Thus, constructivist philosophy pervades many of the new curricula at the instructional level, using approaches that allow students to create meaning for themselves.

Finally, curriculum philosophies that consider postpositivist orientations, that suggest we learn differently in different settings and with different people, are in play in many charter schools in which the emphases are based on collaborative learning for social justice, for improved relationships, and for identity development. In promoting multiculturalism, the curriculum view becomes more proactive, considering the development and adoption of action plans that

TABLE 0.1
Curriculum Philosophies

Curriculum Paradigm	Ontology	Epistemology	Axiology	Methodology	Influences/Precursors
Traditionalist (academic rationalism)	Reality is manifested in representational modes.	The world is knowable through studying the products of the past.	Quality matters.	Reading and discussion of ideas, issues, and themes.	Adler (1984) Phenix (1962)
Social reconstructionism	Reality is socially constructed.	The world is knowable through social actions that promote equality or inequality.	Equity matters.	Challenging existing social order through plans of action enacted in social agencies of power.	Banks (1975, 1991)
Cognitive constructionism	Reality is individually constructed by encountering experiences that challenge at a higher level than competency.	The world is knowable by experiencing and applying key skills and concepts.	Direct experiences, mediated by social interactions, matter.	Cooperative/collaborative learning that is growth-producing and productive.	Csikszentmihalyi (1990) Vygotsky (1978)
Behavioristic positivism; mastery learning	Reality is observation and perception of behaviors with mastery as a goal.	The world is knowable by verification of observations and incrementalism.	Skepticism matters.	Scientific method; emphasis on assessment of learning to reflect mastery.	Bloom (1956) Skinner (1967) Tyler (1949)
Postpositivism	Reality is limited to consensual communities.	The world is knowable "through a glass darkly."	Person-context interaction matters.	Depth of understanding; use of schemas and scaffolds to enhance connections and sense making.	Gardner (1983)

TABLE 0.2

**Models of Curriculum Organization in Gifted Education
Linked to General Curriculum Paradigms**

Gifted Curriculum Models	Paradigms
» Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (SEM); Sternberg's Componential Intelligence Approach	» Cognitive constructivism
» Stanley's Diagnostic-Prescriptive (D-P) model of acceleration	» Behavioristic positivism
» Ford's multicultural curriculum model	» Social reconstructionism
» VanTassel-Baska's Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM)	» Academic rationalism
» Tomlinson et al.'s Parallel Curriculum Model	» Postpositivism

seek to improve or overturn the existing social order on behalf of minority perspectives.

Several philosophies also abound about the purpose of curricula in programs for gifted learners. In a sense, each of these philosophies contributes a competing paradigm. Table 0.2 shows the links of gifted education curriculum models to existing paradigms about the overall educational enterprise, each of which exerts some influence over how schooling is carried out.

The cognitive constructivist model is represented in the gifted literature by Renzulli's Schoolwide Enrichment Model (see Renzulli & Reis, 1985, 2014) and other similar approaches that place the responsibility for learning at advanced levels primarily on the student, with the teacher serving as a facilitator to the learning enterprise by providing materials and resources, presenting probing questions, and introducing students to skill sets that will promote higher level thinking processes and problem-solving approaches. Sternberg's (1981) Componential Model also follows a constructivist philosophy, grounded in the belief that individual aptitudes for different instructional approaches will guide learners in the task of self-differentiation as they seek out the instructional approach most fitting for their individual growth.

The social reconstruction model is best represented in gifted education by the ideas of Ford (see Ford, 1996, 2011) in espousing a multicultural curriculum, one that examines multiple perspectives and voices in understanding phenomena and events. It also emphasizes the psychological need of a society to move beyond the stereotypes and barriers that prevent the eradication of racism, classism, and sexism to create a better world, suggesting that students are active agents in creating plans and policies to improve their world.

The behavioral positivist model aligns well with the work of Julian Stanley and his associates (see Swiatek, 2002), who have promoted the talent search model for gifted learners. Based on the assumption that gifted learners can

progress more rapidly through traditional curriculum experiences if these experiences are well-organized for advanced learning, this paradigm also acknowledges the systems that drive educational environments, based on the premise of learning progress in a time-linear way. The model also purports to plan, monitor, and assess learning in traditional ways that provide quantitative demonstrations of learning achieved.

The academic rationalist model is the most closely aligned with the work of VanTassel-Baska and her associates (see VanTassel-Baska & Wood, 2009), working with the Integrated Curriculum Model, which presupposes that gifted learners have differentiated needs that may be best satisfied through multiple pathways to learning—accelerative and advanced, higher level thinking and problem solving, and conceptual. The work also suggests that the dynamic interaction of teachers and learners with these approaches produces optimal learning. This is best stimulated through exposure to challenging ideas and products, from all cultures and ages, which can be emulated as students seek to understand existing knowledge in the disciplines and to construct meaning for themselves.

The postpositivist model may best be explicated using the Parallel Curriculum Model from gifted education as an example (see Tomlinson et al., 2002). The model is grounded in the recognition that gifted students represent multiple selves whose learning states may shift as they mature and grow at irregular rates. Thus, learning pathways must be constructed that invite them to focus on school-based learning at advanced levels, on the work of the professions in using the tools and practices of real-world practitioners, on identity formation that will shape their professional futures, and on big ideas that permeate understanding the world across disciplines.

Although these paradigms may be viewed as competitive, they also may be seen as complementary when translated into the context of classroom practice. In fact, many gifted programs try to be eclectic in their curricular orientation, never ascribing totally to one view over another. This is especially apparent in gifted program goal structures, which tend to include an emphasis on each of these orientations to learning. What varies is the context for the curriculum focus. For example, the Stanley approach is often an augmentation to the school curriculum, taking place through online and summer opportunities to learn, while the use of project-based learning, as espoused by Renzulli, may more likely occur in schoolwide settings that involve the entire school population. The ICM may more likely be found in content-based programs for providing gifted instruction, aligned with the relevant content standards.

The intention of this book is to provide a clear and cogent way to approach the development of curriculum for gifted and high-ability learners that is substantive, rigorous, and aligns with the paradigm of academic rationalism via the

ICM. Such an approach is still the most viable, given the ongoing interest in national content standards and the recognition that accountability must extend to assessing students' authentic learning, not just their short-term achievement in all relevant areas of learning.

In the intervening years since the first edition of this text was published, there was a trend toward greater emphasis on high-stakes state assessments in schools, with less direct emphasis on curriculum standards. During this period, studies have shown the use of only a limited number of standards at lower levels of cognition for purposes of assessing learning, a situation that in turn has led to instructional devolution whereby teachers teach only to the content to be covered on these assessments. Now, as we publish the third edition of the book, new standards have surfaced for use in most states along with new assessments that require more open-ended and mindful responses on the part of students. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics now drive instruction in most states, with the exception of Virginia and Texas and a few others that have chosen to modify these standards slightly to make them state-based. In science, the Next Generation Science Standards provide direction for science instruction in many states and offer assessments that require student responses at a higher level and in greater depth with respect to the scientific research process.

With respect to gifted learners, this situation has further exacerbated the need for challenging curriculum, delivered in a context of dynamic, inquiry-based instruction. Within gifted education, the response to the mandate of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the policy engine that fueled the degradation of standards and the elevation of assessments, has been to adopt the philosophy of differentiation for all, using resource consulting teachers trained in gifted pedagogy to work in inclusion classrooms, with the hopes of reaching gifted learners in these contexts. To date, little evidence exists to suggest that this strategy is working (Schroth, 2014), with no evidence to contradict earlier research indicating that the majority of classrooms do not practice differentiation for the gifted (Westberg & Daoust, 2003) and are not grouping gifted learners in any configuration that would allow for meaningful differentiation to occur.

Even where cluster grouping is occurring, it is being subverted by teachers unwilling or unable to differentiate for subgroups in their room, especially for the gifted and talented. Although special education teachers are available for one-on-one consultation with learners, gifted students are treated as a part of the whole group, with the same curriculum outcomes identified and sought. In some contexts, cluster grouping is being treated as experimental, with one classroom of learners using it and another not. In this setting, action research studies have demonstrated significantly greater learning for the classrooms