TOWARDS A CONSISTENTLY CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY OF CURRICULUM DESIGN:

(A comparative analysis of popular curricular resources and the ideological characteristics of each one.)

Introduction

“I believe that knowing, teaching, and learning are grounded in sacred soil and that renewing my vocation as a teacher requires cultivating a sense of the sacred” (Palmer, 2007, p. 114)

The persistent challenge for the Christian educator is to find a way to allow their Christian worldview to inform the practice of pedagogy, so that he or she can truly connect who they are with what they do. This paper is an introductory attempt to explore what it means to develop learning environments and curriculum in a way that integrates our Christian worldview and inner life of faith into every aspect of our education practice. The paper will explore the four curriculum ideologies posited by Schiro (2013); how they have been expressed in a number of curricula and methods typically used by home-based educators; and suggest what an education system based on a consistently Christian worldview might look like. Finally, an example of such a system, the ‘Charlotte Mason’ method, will be highlighted.

Curriculum Ideologies

Schiro (2013) identified four distinct curriculum ideologies: the Traditional Scholar Academic; Social Efficiency; Learner Centred; and Social Reconstruction ideologies. Analysis of the most popular curricular resources used by Christian homeschoolers over the last twenty years, reveals that although each one claims to be totally ‘Christian’, they tend to fit into one or other of Schiro’s curriculum ideology categories. It is interesting that the majority of these education suppliers have also boldly proclaimed their particular curriculum displays the ‘Biblical method’ for how we should educate our children (McNeice, 2010, p. 56).

The following list explains the four major types of homeschooling curricula that developed from particular ‘curriculum ideologies’ (Schiro, 2013).

1.a) The first curriculum ideology is called the ‘Traditional Scholar Academic’ in which there is a set body of knowledge that must be directly taught to the student who will memorise this body of facts. The programmed work-text would be an example of a ‘teacher centred’ method, except that with homeschooling resources the ‘teacher’ is the author of the work-text speaking to the student. Examples include Accelerated Christian Education (ACE), Alpha-Omega, A-beka Books, Rod & Staff, Bob Jones University Press, Calvert Education, and Seton Home Study. These were usually originally created for school, and then adapted for homeschooling.

1.b) Van Brummelen (1994) identifies a subset of the Traditional Scholar Academic, called ‘Perennialists’ who emphasise our common cultural heritage. “Learning to use higher mental processes and cultivating rationality and reflection becomes the main thrust of education. The content of the curriculum therefore needs to offer students the best thinking humans have done through the ages” (p. 8). Typically known amongst homeschoolers as the ‘Classical Education’ method (Wilson, Callihan & Jones, 1995), this concept was renewed by Dorothy Sayers in her 1947 paper ‘The Lost Tools of Learning’, and popularised by Mortimer Adler’s ‘The Paideia Proposal’ (1982). It employed rote learning during the ‘Grammar Stage’ (ages 5-9), thinking skills during the ‘Dialectic’ or logical reasoning stage (ages 10-13), and academic writing and debating skills during the ‘Rhetoric’ stage (ages 14-18). Examples of a classical curriculum include The Well Trained Mind, Tapestry of Grace (a hybrid of Unit Study with Classical Methods), Memoria Press, Classical Conversations, Trivium Pursuit, and Veritas Press.

2. The ‘Social Efficiency Ideology’ has not led to a particular curriculum supplier, but is more a philosophy held by some (though not all) ‘natural learners’ and ‘un-schoolers’. It is a pragmatic approach that favours training in practical skills for the workforce in preference to academic pursuits. Rod and Staff Publications could fit into this category as they come from a Mennonite tradition that tends to only educate children until the early teen years, before moving into training for trades. Some of Dewey’s pragmatic ideas about ‘learning through doing’ could fit here (Chambliss, 1996).

3. The Thematic Unit Study Approach arose from a ‘Learner Centred’ or ‘constructivist’ philosophy as popularised by Piaget. In common with the Social Efficiency ideology, constructivists usually employ discovery-learning through experience. Often called the ‘grand-daddy of Unit Studies’, Konos Character Curriculum was designed around a set of character traits that springboard off into cross-curricular topics for all subjects. Features include a hands-on, project-based, discovery learning programme that integrates all subjects into thematic topics that are also multi-age, which suits the homeschool family or a multi-age classroom. Building on the success of Konos in the late 1980’s, other unit study curricula began to appear. Examples include Weaver Curriculum, Five-in-a-row, Father’s Heart, Heart of Wisdom, and Tapestry of Grace. All have been predominantly influenced by a constructivist view of learning.

4. ‘Social Reconstruction’ ideology, which could include Van Brummelen’s (1994) category of the ‘Critical Theorists’, assumes that education is the social process through which society is reconstructed (p. 18). Believing society is basically sick, they espouse a vision of how society ‘should be’, and pupils are encouraged to act to fulfil that vision. This ideology is found in the writings of the homeschool supplier ‘Light Education Ministries’, who follow the reconstructionist theology of Rousas Rushdoony (L.E.M., nd). Apart from Christian reconstructionists, there are also cosmic humanist, ‘natural learners’ who are radical environmentalists and often have Marxist/socialist leanings, some being ardent conspiracy theorists. Steiner and Montessori use some learning strategies from a ‘learner centred’ ideology; however having both been strongly influenced by Theosophy, and being cosmic humanist in philosophy, they both fit partly into this social reconstruction category. During her address to the National Pedagogical Congress in 1889, Montessori presented a vision of social and economic reform through education (Montessori, 1946/1889). Montessori promoted the innate spiritually connected life force in all things, similar to the Gaia Hypothesis (Lovelock, 2000), and that our purpose on earth was not for us to enjoy the world, … “but we are created in order to evolve the cosmos”. (Montessori, 1946/1889, p 22)

A philosophy of education developed from a Christian worldview, may be positioned separately to all four theories, and yet could contain some elements of each, possibly illustrated by the following Venn diagram:

Palmer’s (2007) vision of a ‘community of truth’ provides an example of this:

“…where the subject ‘sits in the middle and knows’. Perhaps the classroom should be neither teacher-centred [as in the Traditional Academic Scholar ideology] nor student-centred, but subject-centred. Modelled on the community of truth, this is a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focussed on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-centred education are merged and transcended by putting not teacher, not student, but subject at the centre of our attention.” (p.119)

Van Brummelen (1994) suggests that in the past [and probably today as well] most people would assume a definition of curriculum as meaning a scope and sequence of content to be taught. However educational philosophers such as Dewey, Montessori, and Steiner (all contemporaries of each other) began to address “not only course content, but also teaching methods”, the ‘how’ of teaching as much as the ‘what’ (p. 5). Education systems such as Steiner and Montessori are renowned for providing a rich and positive learning environment that is multisensory, aesthetically inspiring and humanely valuing of the children’s dignity and innate ability to make their own mental connections (Hainstock, 1971, pp. 6-7; Steiner Education Australia, 2014).

All of these qualities would be valued in a Christian learning environment. However, the casual student of educational history may be tempted to ponder the questions of “why two of the major educational thinkers were drawn to a spiritual nature within education;… and why there wasn’t a Christian equivalent? It seems as though there was definitely a movement within church schools, but not to this creative and innovative level.” (Tabor, 2014). Regarding the first question, we must remember that in the philosophical climate of the late 1800s, after Rousseau, Darwin, Spencer and Nietzschke had dispensed with God as the first cause and provider of meaning in life, there seemed to be a mad scramble to find a spiritually satisfying explanation for existence that provided some purposeful meaning to life. The natural world and universe itself (including humanity) almost had to become a self-creating God, a ‘mother-nature’. Hence the rise of a cosmic spirituality. Regarding the second question of why there was no Christian equivalent to the creative genius and initiative of Montessori and Steiner in the field of education; a broader investigation of the history of education throughout the Western world reveals that in actual fact there was such an innovative Christian equivalent who had enormous influence for half a century, but whose Christian philosophy became ‘out of fashion’ with the growing secular humanism that had taken over through the ‘roaring twenties’ and into the post-World-War II period of self-reliance (Schaeffer, 1982, pp. 167-182).

Charlotte Mason (b. 1842 - d. 1923) was a British educational philosopher, reformer, and pioneer in the field of education who established scores of schools across the UK and the world. Historical archives (Trove, 1939) reveal that some of her schools were even established in Australia during the late 1930’s. Charlotte Mason, founded the ‘House of Education’ which later became the ‘Charlotte Mason Teacher Training College’ to train teachers and governesses in her philosophy and educational methods. Mason’s methods opposed generally accepted views of how children should be educated, at least a decade before Dewey, Montessori and Steiner.

Charlotte Mason believed that “children are persons”, who should be treated with respect, never to be despised because they are made in the image of God. Her concept of ‘a liberal education for all’ meant that she wanted children to experience a broad feast of ideas utilising the best in literature, art, and contemporary science etc. Wherever possible she used well written interesting narratives (she called ‘living books’) rather than dry textbooks. Placing emphasis on learning through real life, she included regular nature walks, hands-on learning opportunities, and encouraged learning through everyday spontaneous opportunities. Up to half the school day was dedicated to musical, artistic and handicraft activities plus creative play (Redeemer University College, 2013).

From our vantage point today, these multisensory ideas and methods of engagement may seem self-evident; however they were not so at the end of the 19th century. An archive from The Fairfield School suggests that “it could be argued that it is only because of Charlotte Mason and others like her that they are regarded as self-evident now” (Fairfield School, 2014). This is because Charlotte Mason’s ideas had an enormous influence on the British School system for a time, until the Christian perspective became out of fashion towards the 1960s. There is some evidence that Maria Montessori was well acquainted with Charlotte Mason and may have been influenced in some aspects of her philosophy (Rouaix, 2014, Standing, 1998), although they fell seriously out of favour with each other in the early 1900s. Mason established her system and was publishing her Christian philosophy of education long before Montessori started her own training as a teacher at the University of Rome. Mason published ‘Home Education’ in 1886 to train parents and governesses in her methods, founded the Parent’s National Education Union (PNEU) in 1887, and her teacher training facility in 1892 (Redeemer University, 2013). However Montessori only commenced training to be a teacher in 1897 and opened her first classroom in 1907 (Standing, 1998). Steiner’s first school was opened in 1917. Even John Dewey’s ideas on progressive education were not made public until eleven years after Mason’s publication. Dewey made his presentation of ‘My Pedagogic Creed’ in 1897, ‘The School and Society’ in 1900, and ‘The Child and the Curriculum’ in 1907 (Chambliss, 1996).

For 21st century students attempting to develop a Christian view of education, Charlotte Mason’s work is worth studying because she was a true Christian educational pioneer. Developed from analysis of her own attempts to live in a consistently Christian manner, her vision of Christian education (Mason, 1886/1918) was formed without the backdrop of creative thinkers such as Dewey, Montessori, Steiner, Piaget, or Vygotski. Mason’s philosophy arose out of the ‘inner landscape’ as proposed by Palmer (2007, Audio CD, Track 5), and her worldview - what Lyons (2011) calls our ‘interpretive filter’ (pp. 3-4) – which had a profound impact on her practice and teaching methods (Schaeffer-Macaulay, 1984).

As a model of a Christian philosophy of education, one may ask - how do Mason’s methods compare with the four curriculum ideologies posited by Schiro (2013)? Charlotte Mason used classics, works from the great thinkers, and well written ‘living books’ containing engaging stories and profound ideas. Crucial was Mason’s belief in absolute truth, and wisdom that should be passed on to the child. However she differed from the ‘Traditional Scholar Academic’ ideology in that her starting point was always the ‘personhood’ of the child as made in the image of God. Consequently, the student is due the respect of being able to have direct access to the subject without too much explanation by the ‘teacher’. While still remaining a coach of academic skills, the teacher was to practice, what she called, ‘masterly inactivity’. This required the teacher to allow the child to develop his or her own connections with the material and arrive at their own conclusions.

Because of this, some could come to the conclusion she followed a fully ‘Learner Centred’ ideology. She unquestionably promoted respect for the innate capacity of the child’s own mind to digest food for thought leading to the formation of their own connections. To treat the child as a ‘tabula rassa’, or a sack to be filled, and telling the child what connections to make (as in the Scholar Academic) were anathema to Mason. She seemed to make ‘learner centred’ comments such as…

“No one knoweth the things of man but the spirit of a man which is in him; therefore, there is no education but self-education, and as soon as a young child begins his education he does so as a student.” …   
“Self-education is the only possible education; the rest is mere veneer laid on the surface of a child's nature.” (Mason, 1886/1918).

However, Mason’s Christian philosophy of learning would part company with the radical constructivist ‘learner centred’ ideology on two central issues:

i) The first point of difference is the secular humanist concept that people “are essentially good in nature” (Schiro, 2013, p.5). Mason believed that people are made in the image of God, and they are also born with a fallen nature. This means they are neither simplistically wholly good or wholly bad. Instead they are born with possibilities or tendencies towards both good and bad. Children have free choice, and one of the roles of the parent and teacher is to train them, by way of the discipline of habits, to make good choices rather than bad (Mason, 1886/1918).

ii) The second point of variance is that in a radical learner-centred ideology the learners “are viewed as the source of content for the curriculum, their ends are considered to be the appropriate ends for the curriculum” (Schiro, 2013). By contrast, Mason believed in carefully choosing quality material that would provide a generous diet of mental food for the mind of the child.

The ‘Social Reconstruction’ ideology, which grew out of a Marxist/Socialist worldview and is prevalent within the majority of contemporary university faculties (Nobel, 2006, p.9), at its core, “assumes that meaning in people’s lives is determined by their social experiences. They believe that “truth and knowledge are based on and defined by cultural assumptions” (Schiro, 2013; p.6). The ‘cultural transformation mandate’ of the Christian worldview shares the social reconstructionist’s desire to make a positive impact on society; but does not believe that truth and knowledge are merely constructed relative to the changing fashions and whims of culture. There is absolute ‘true truth’ as Francis Schaeffer described it (Macaulay, n.d.), even though we cannot know that truth exhaustively, and so as scholars, we ‘only see through a glass dimly’.

Regarding the ‘Social Efficiency’ ideology, Mason advocated allocating a significant portion of the afternoon for handicrafts. She suggests that if possible they should develop skills useful to life and employment. However, at the same time, she does not advocate that a utilitarian view of education should be the primary focus. She advocates a broad liberal education for all, and suggests that nearly all children can develop habits of focussed engagement with academic topics, if trained carefully (Mason, 1886/1918).

Conclusion:

This paper has explored a range of curriculum ideologies, and shown how diverse Christian homeschool curricula are placed in relation to their underpinning curricular ideologies. The pros and cons of each system have been analysed from a Christian worldview filter, which can provide a starting point for the development of a truly Christian expression of education. Finally, the archival history of education has revealed that in spite of a seeming lack of creative, and innovative Christian philosophers influencing educational practice at the start of the twentieth century, we have not ‘come to the party too late’; but rather have led the way. The legacy of Charlotte Mason, carried on through the homeschooling community and a growing number of schools throughout the Western world, is reviving a truly authentic and creative expression of how to educate children using a well thought-out Christian worldview. It is the author’s hope that a further study of Charlotte Mason’s unique and effective methods could bring about a truly creative renaissance in a contemporary understanding of a consistently Christian educational practice.

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