

A One-Size-Fit-All Approach Does Not Work in Education: Elliot Eisner's Argument to Specified Educational Objectives

Abstract: Elliot Eisner as one of the United States' leading academic minds particularly contributes positively to the formulation of educational objectives based on the consideration of individuality, the real classroom, the real society, and the potential of the arts in the educational development of the young. This paper tends to argue educational objectives are hindering curriculum development. These objectives would become a dogma when they are created as consolidated and mechanistic standards measuring all students. The underlying methods to address this issue are analyzed. Arguably, it might positively affect the formulation of educational policies.

Keywords: Elliot Eisner, specified educational objectives, underlying methods

Introduction

Elliot Eisner argues that the objective of reformers is to create a blueprint for where we are heading to create a common basis for appraising students (Brown, 2017). This statement suggests that stating educational objectives would surely be the top priority for educational reformers when framing the curriculum. Specifically, educational objectives are the direction at which the curriculum needs to be aimed. Moreover, it promotes the selection and organization of curriculum contents; the specified content terms in educational objectives also facilitate the evaluation of curriculum outcomes (Eisner, 1967). However, Eisner also promotes the curriculum landscape by overtly critiquing the value of fixed educational objectives advocated by scholars such as Franklin Bobbitt and Ralph Tyler (American Education Research Association [AERA], 2017). This paper attempts to argue that clarified and prescribed educational objectives can hinder curriculum development. These objectives also become an irrational dogma when created as a consolidated and mechanistic standard measuring all students and a set of fixed cultural values that mirrors the mainstream ideology. The possible methods of ameliorating the issue will be analyzed likewise.

Educational Objectives as the Key Tools for Teaching

In essence, an educational objective is viewed as an important tool for teaching. Firstly, as noted by Pinar (2012), "Often sold as accountability authoritarianism in effect replaces education as a priority" (p. 3). Pinar also mentions the curriculum expertise are inclined to connect the curriculum to student performance on standardized test scores so politicians can facilitate control in what is to be taught in schools (Brown, 2017). Hence, curriculum specialists actively emphasize the importance of specified educational objectives and enacted the guidelines that are predestined and fixed to the objectives' formulation. Secondly, educational objectives allow educators to articulate their expectations for students, which can inform educators as they write lesson plans, tests, quizzes, and assignment sheets. Thirdly, the function of traditional education is to transmit facts, skills, and values to students. Based on the orientation, specified educational objectives is more likely to stress mastery of traditional subjects through traditional teaching methodology, especially, textbook learning, where student skills are inevitably developed by specific and expected instructional strategies. Miller & Aeller (1990) say that students of basic skills and certain cultural values are necessary to function in society and declared the application of a mechanistic view of human behavior to curriculum planning. Additionally, Eisner (2001) says that "the formulation of standards and the measurement of performance were intended to tidy up a messy system and to make teachers and school administrators truly accountable...." (p.281). The reason why schools actively implement systematized and standardized educational objectives are that the public will know their performance. That is, the specified educational objective can be interpreted as the extrinsic incentives to trigger the development of schools. Moreover, Schools are usually compared with a business that "the survival of the fittest" is the tenet that determines which ones survive (Eisner, 2001). In other words, they might go out of the business if schools cannot have positive outcomes on standardized tests.

The Limitations of the Fixed Educational Objective

Nevertheless, the limitations of the fixed educational objective are apparent when it is to perform its functions in a curriculum.

Behavioristic objectives

Firstly, Eisner (2001) claims that exclusively utilizing behavioristic objectives serve as a limitation to the curriculum through its failure to account for cultural background, the idiosyncrasy, and otherness (e.g., gender and disability) of students. The traditionally specified educational objective is derived from the assumption that children enter the school system with the standardized physical and intellectual abilities in place

to cater to the demands of the classroom. But, if children repeatedly fail at a task, they would start to become frustrated, anxious, and even give up their studies. Arguably, the specified educational objective overlooks an interaction between coping with the introduced conditions in classrooms and schools and considering multiple personal qualities, ideas, and expectations connecting with the conditions (Eisner, 2001). To be more exact, initially, gender and intellectual development differences are not taken into account when it comes to the formulation of educational objectives although the differences are occurring between boys and girls of the same age. An illustration of the point can be made that girls tend to develop language skills slightly ahead of boys, while boys generally need more time and opportunity for robust physical abilities. Some children are ready to read at the age of four years, while others may not be ready until seven years old. In China, due to essentialism which is remarkably typical educational philosophy, everyone's development is expected to comply with the same model. When it comes to measuring whether a person is successful or not, a unified standard (i.e., academic achievement) usually is used. Curriculum contents are based on the need for the "College Entrance Examination". Because the examination only includes the accumulation and extraction of knowledge, students only mechanically recite and repeat old knowledge and skills. More seriously, the teaching contents of primary schools have been permeated into early childhood education (Chan, 2012), which hinders the development of children's creativity, curiosity, and individuality to large extents. Furthermore, the cultural background of students is not sufficiently considered in light of fixed educational objectives. For instance, the reflection of minority cultures of curriculum in China can be divided into five types (Zheng, 2012): (1) Disappearance--minorities' culture and history are ignored; (2) Rigid impression--imposing some concepts into minorities; (3) Imbalance--selecting the contents of curriculum according to mainstream culture; (4) Deviation from reality--ignoring the difference and conflict of ethnic groups; (5) Insulation--the history and culture of minorities are depicted as ornament. Based on the curriculum activities, the students from minorities are marginalized to some degree. In Canada, Asian students do not prefer to express their ideas in a direct manner. Conversely, native English speakers are taught in schools with good writing styles such as a clear progression of ideas. Based on the same educational objectives, the performances may be lower among Asian students compared to Western students. Additionally, the students from the vulnerable groups (e.g., disability, female, and adverse social-economic group) are inclined to face a more educational dilemma. Precisely, educational objectives often more likely to embody a male view in that the designers of the curriculum usually are male, which neglects female characteristics and feelings (Huang, 2003). Some curriculums trend to address physical disabilities' education but the children with learning disabilities, emotional or language barriers are ignored to a large extent (German Inclusive Schools, n.d.). Actually, most of them are not instinctive but the repercussion of the non-rational education.

Educational objectives derived from curriculum theory

Secondly, Eisner (1967) presents that "educational objectives are typically derived from curriculum theory, which assumes that it is possible to predict with a fair degree of accuracy what the outcomes of instruction will be." (p.111). Arguably, the statement is reasonable to frame educational objectives prior to the formulation of curriculum construction. As signified by Eisner (1967), "one should know where he is headed before embarking on a trip." (p.113). However, in the real classroom, the results of instruction usually are more dynamic, diverse and complicated for specified education objectives to contain. In the process of learning and teaching, unpredictable opportunities might happen such as a valuable point, an important concept, and interesting ideas due to the classroom discussion. Educators might sensitively figure out students' changing interests and flexibly adjust their teaching goals and methods instead of conforming rigid educational objectives to mechanistically measure students. An illustration of this point can be made by Aoki (1993) that Miss O, as a grade 5 teacher, taught her students in the landscape of curriculum as lived,

For Miss O it is a world of face-to-face living with Andrew, with his mop of red hair, who struggles hard to learn to read; with Sara, whom Miss O can count on to tackle her language assignment with aplomb; with popular Margaret, who bubbles and who is quick to offer help to others and to welcome others' help; with Tom, a frequent daydreamer, who loves to allow his thoughts to roam beyond the windows of the classroom;...Miss O knows their uniqueness from having lived daily with them. And she knows that their uniqueness disappears into the shadow when they are spoken of in the prosaically abstract language of the external curriculum planners. (p.259)

Therefore, the process of teaching and learning is too manifold to be specified in a predestined and planned educational objective.

Educational objectives viewed as a standard to measure the outcomes of curriculum and instruction

Thirdly, ideally, educational objectives can be viewed as a standard to measure the outcomes of curriculum and instruction (Eisner, 1967). Nevertheless, not all results of curriculum yield to the measurement. For instance, it is more likely to mechanically measure science and engineering statement. Some fields such as arts which more are qualitative and flexible have no rigid rules so they are less likely assessed by the given criteria. As noted by Eisner (1967), "the judgment by which a critic determines the value of a poem, novel, or play is not achieved merely by applying standards already known to the particular product being judged"(p.112). In Chinese schools, the assessment of art courses is relatively simple and rough such as qualified and unqualified, or with a five-point system of an assessment committee to take the subjective average score, which hinders the improvement of students' imagination. Put differently, standards have gradually become ideological and subjective albeit initial standards stressed fair measurability to all students (Eisner, 2001). Dewey (1939) also mentions that "as standards of measure, standards define things with respect to quantity. To be able to measure quantities is a great aid to further judgments, but it is not a mode of judgment."(p.307). Accordingly, the curriculum plan regarding a given educational objective as a standard to measure outcomes of instruction neglects those fields that cannot be quantitatively measured.

Fixed educational objectives engendering the curriculum narrowed as school-based policies

Finally, fixed educational objectives are intended to engender that the curriculum merely is narrowed as school-based policies that decide what should be taught and be tested. Schools more likely select what core subjects are, which unavoidably results in other subjects marginalized such as art, sport and social study that students exactly feel interested in. The core subjects in most cases play a crucial role in measuring a school's teaching quality provided for students. The function of schooling motivates the students who are adept at the core subjects to do better in schools. Eisner (2001) points out that "the function of schooling is to enable students to do better in life. What students learn in school ought to exceed in relevance the limits of the school's program" (p.281). Thereby, utilizing prescribed objectives hampers students to make a connection to the real society that they will involve in.

Innovative Recommendations drawing upon Elliot Eisner's theory

Attention to individuality

Based on the limitations of specified educational objectives above, Eisner came up with several innovative recommendations for formulating and examining the curriculum. Precisely, Eisner (2001) stresses: "commensurability decreases when attention to individuality increases." That is, the curriculum plan guided by sounder educational objectives should serve to discover students' distinctive features and take the difference of their cultural background into account. Dewey (1934) also emphasizes that the description of individuality was indispensable when it came to assessment practices. When students' aptitudes, interests, and context can be sufficiently considered in the curriculum, they are more likely to exert their strength in schooling and even find better positions belonging to them in society. As mentioned by Eisner (2001),

When youngsters can play to their strengths, those whose aptitudes are in, say, mathematics are going to go faster and further in that area than youngsters whose aptitudes are in some other field. But in those other fields, those youngsters would go faster and further than those whose aptitudes are in math. (p.286)

Moreover, educational objectives infusing multicultural content can help students from different ethnic groups participating in cooperative learning activities. Educators utilize images, pictures and other means to help students understand the characteristics and features of other groups, letting students learn outstanding alternative experiences of different ethnic groups. The curriculum also tends to judge the conflicts caused by racial discrimination in order to reduce prejudice and stereotype. Teaching methods should be suitable for the students' learning style and culture and respect their mother tongue and dialect. Curriculum evaluation is expected to consider the cultural diversity of students. For example, in Canada, Aboriginal heroes, festivals and other cultural factors are tried to infuse into the curriculum (Armstrong, 2013), which promotes the curriculum indigenized to some extent.

Cognitive pluralism

Secondly, Eisner mentions "cognitive pluralism" as the orientations of the curriculum plan (AERA, 2017). This perspective underscores the idea that students should be afforded opportunities to learn and communicate their understandings by manifold forms of representation. Eisner (1967) presents that educational objectives are supposed to consider multiple forms of enriched meaning in schooling. "...it biases the criteria through which human competence and intelligence are appraised" (Eisner, 2002, p 99). "Schools have a role...to

offer the young an opportunity to develop the kinds of intellectual processes that will be useful for dealing with the likes of e.e. cummings..." (Eisner, 2002, p102). Specifically, the function of educational objectives not only directs students to "explicit curriculum" such as learning what is written in textbooks, the rule of a classroom, teachers' expectations of students, and standardized test performance. What is more, educational objectives are expected to guide students to understand and analyze "implicit curriculum" i.e., which "is implied by the very structure and nature of schools, much of what revolves around daily or established routines" (Wilson, n.d. para.1), and "null curriculum" i.e., which "we do not teach, thus giving students the message that these elements are not important in their educational experiences or our society." (Wilson, n.d. para.1) This can push students to multiple modes of thought, which are beneficial for them to do better in society.

Aesthetic approach to curriculum

Thirdly, it is hoped that an aesthetic approach to curriculum activities framed based on a more rational educational objective can be utilized in schooling. Eisner (2002) proposes that the thinking needed to frame artistic work is related to an entire education. The methods contain from the arts into the teaching of all other subjects would foster a richer educational experience. For example, a report of a Canadian curriculum (1993) displayed, "the high school graduates' entering the Faculty of Science undergraduate programs across Canada, by the end of the third year, nearly one-third of the students were dropping out..."(p.255). The main reason is that these students found science a touch boring because they merely assigned experiments. Therefore, Dr. Stuart Smith, a scientist said: "science must be taught as humanity" (as cited by Aoki, 1993, para. 1). Therefore, the aesthetic approach might help educators re-understand the curricular landscape.

Conclusion

In summary, Eisner pushes the curriculum landscape to a new stage by openly questioning the value of measurable educational objectives. Eisner argues that specified objectives render the limitations to the curriculum construction because it fails to account for four factors. i.e., the students' characteristics and cultural background, the actual classroom environment, some subjects such as art that merely can be measured by making a human qualitative judgment instead of given standards, and a connection between the curriculum and human experience and the real world that students are interacting with. What is more, Eisner put forward the effective means of improving the rigidly standardized measurement in schooling as follows: Firstly, individuality and context of students are supposed to be paid more attention rather than are marginalized in schools. Furthermore, Eisner also mentions a curricular landscape of multiplicity as the orientations to the curriculum. This perspective stresses that students should be offered opportunities to learn and communicate their understandings through varied forms of representation instead of becoming faceless others. Finally, embedding an aesthetic approach to curriculum make curriculum lexicon more refined and enriched, which expands educators' lenses for regarding curriculums. According to what was mentioned above, Eisner's argument to fixed educational objectives still bears a positive implication in schooling today. One size cannot fit all in education.

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