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In the book, *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry* (2013), Ashwani Kumar argues that using curriculum to transform individual consciousness is the key to creating change in educational (and other) structures, since these structures are the manifestations of human consciousness. In his role as an Assistant Professor of Education, this text aligns with Kumar’s teaching and research related to holistic education including curriculum and philosophy of education. This book explores the roles of consciousness, education and meditative inquiry in creating a new type of learning environment where the individual’s consciousness is privileged over the structure of institutions.

Before reviewing this text, it is important for readers to understand how Kumar uses curriculum and philosophy to develop and support his thesis. Kumar bases his thinking about curriculum on the work of Jiddu Krishnamurti (a “philosopher, educator and institution builder,” p. 20) and James Macdonald (curriculum theorist). He identifies three themes which connect their work with his. Krishnamurti, Macdonald and Kumar all “consider the individual – not systems, theories, methods, plans, or tests – to be the core of education,” (p. 19). All see social conditioning through education as instilling fear and hindering the development of students. Finally they believe that understanding the self (one’s own consciousness) is the most important part of education and leads to transformation of society.

Kumar uses Krishnamurti and Bohm’s (1986) definition of consciousness, saying, “The word consciousness means all the memories, experiences, beliefs, aspirations, symbols, and dogmas invented and put together by thought,” (Kumar, 2013, p. 41). He goes on to say that consciousness is the foundation for thoughts, feelings and actions and thoughts, feelings and actions form the basis for structures (educational, political, social, etc.). Therefore, to resolve structural issues, addressing human consciousness is the key. Curriculum is the point of connection on which Kumar focuses in terms of how to engage and empower human consciousness. Rather than sustaining the current learning environment that is based on authority and driven by fear and conformity, he suggests that an environment that empowers students to understand themselves is far more valuable for them and the larger communities of which they are a part.

The book examines the dangers inherent in education and other social structures when participants are forced to conform and oppressed in ways that stifle creativity by means of socialized conditioning. He introduces the book by focusing on structures and their role in developing human beings and human doings saying, “Considering structures of primary importance [rather than individuals] implies that human beings can be organized and controlled like machines,” (p. 15).

Education as an authoritative experience requires conformity as a result of fear of consequences instilled by
teachers, administration, the public and others. It is important to note that Kumar acknowledges that not only do issues related to fear affect students, but they affect teachers (and without stating this explicitly – parents, leaders and communities), as well. He argues that educational institutions, “contribute to making students as well as teachers fearful of the authority of nation-states, the market, society, and exams” (Kumar, 2013, p. 59). In other words, putting structures first dehumanizes us, putting people first humanizes structures.

Issues of obedience, conformity, punishment, control and submission to authority create an educational environment where students are not allowed to grow as independent beings. Creativity, sensitivity, trust and individuality are subjugated to structure. Focusing on the outer activity of individuals (and communities, societies and cultures) misses the point that the outer is a result of the inner. Kumar argues that our fragmentation of the inner being cultivates a dependence on the outer rules and structures since there is no foundation of self upon which to stand or build.

In addition, a dependence on those structures further perpetuates the fear which is institutionalized through our educational structures – a fear that creates in individuals an unwillingness to challenge or change those structures. Kumar discusses the idea of “cumulative psychology” and how the need “to accumulate” relates to capitalist systems. From the beginning of their institutionalized learning, children in education are taught to compete and accumulate good grades, the favor of teachers, awards and recognition for good behavior (conformity).

Implementing Kumar’s curriculum requires a teacher who is non-judgmental, genuine, empathetic and who “meets his or her students person to person, not status to person” (p. 99). The school which houses this type of teacher, Kumar adds, “gives space to openness, dialogue, responsiveness, and humanistic relations between teacher and learner” (p. 99) and is founded upon the idea that children are self-actualizing. The teacher is there to guide, not to direct, to clarify not to dictate, to help and support, not to control the students.
However, it is just when Kumar begins to touch on what is needed to implement this curriculum that questions arise about the applicability of this work. The question is: how does this new educational experience based on a meditative curriculum take root? What does it look like in the classroom? What do these schools look like? On what is it based? One quote Kumar shares – consistent with his argument that individuals need to be privileged over structures is, “No master plans, no methods, no specific theory, ideology or research! What is it that we teach children with then? ‘Only love,’ Krishnamurti (1953, 23) suggests, ‘can bring about the understanding of another’” (p. 105). Love is likely not going to fly in a social and political context which quantifies education through standards, measurements, proficiency exams and rewards good numbers (conformity to expectations) with resources. This text provides a good foundation, but some practical steps and applications are necessary to execute this philosophy in the educational system.

Kumar uses Macdonald’s (1974) discussion on centering, saying, “centering is the fundamental process of human beings that makes sense out of our perceptions and cognitions of reality… centering aims for the completion of the person or the creation of meaning that utilizes all the potential given to each person,” (pp. 106-107). A centering curriculum includes playfulness, meditative thinking, imagining, profound listening, observation and dialogue (“without any form of interpretation, judgment, condemnation, or appreciation” (p. 111)). Identifying these elements is helpful in furthering an understanding of what this might mean in a classroom environment. However, it does little to provide direct applications for what it might look like in a math or English or geography curriculum.

This is where Kumar’s work is weak. He acknowledges this is a philosophical and theoretical book, but his lack of means to effect changes in the existing structure makes actualizing his theory and philosophy very challenging. It is difficult to discern who the audience for this text is. Practitioners are not likely going to be able to implement his philosophies. Resource allocators and key constituents will possibly be alienated by this work.
That said he does attempt to provide some additional guidance to begin thinking about changing the educational experience from a competition and success-driven one to one of caring and individualized focus. His means of giving focus this transformation of educational structures is the curriculum. However, there are no practical, tangible, implementable steps for doing so. This is not a text for practitioners who teach or develop curriculum. While the text poses interesting philosophical considerations, it fails to tie to some key curricular concepts and lacks any practical guidance for getting from where we are to where he purports we ought to be.

There are some key gaps in this text. Kumar barely mentions constructivism and the role of a post-constructivist worldview. Since the latter is essentially what he is purporting in this work, it is something that should have been included and integrated more fully into the text.

In addition, Kumar provides only a passing mention of Dewey’s work and overlooks Vygotsky’s all together. These seem like major oversights when writing on this topic. While it is clear he has tremendous respect for Krishnamurti and Macdonald, there are a variety of other scholars and key figures in education and curriculum development whose perspectives should have been included. The work is weaker for their exclusion.

At one point, Kumar uses an analogy of a plant in his description of the approach to take in creating a new philosophy around educational structures. This is a good way to sum up what he has done and what he has failed to do. Kumar writes, “[R]ather than merely taking care of the flowers and leaves, which are the structures of society, we need to move deeper, into the roots, into our consciousness, which through thoughts, feelings, and actions creates society” (p.56). I do not disagree.

Kumar fails to address issues of transition between where we are now and where he would aspire for us to be in terms of educational structure. If we have only been attending to flowers and leaves, we have developed tools that attend to flowers and leaves. Kumar gives us things to consider about the roots (human consciousness) of our structures (education). He even tells us what we need to
apply to help at the root level (playfulness, freedom, etc.). However, he has not provided us with the means for applying these things effectively. Similarly, while he may identify some weeds that are choking the plants (fear, conditioning and fragmentation), he hasn’t given us the tools to permanently eradicate those weeds.

About the Reviewer

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