

# Curriculum of Life

**Educate Together**  
**Dublin City University**  
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# Agenda

## Part One (9.30 to 11.30 am)

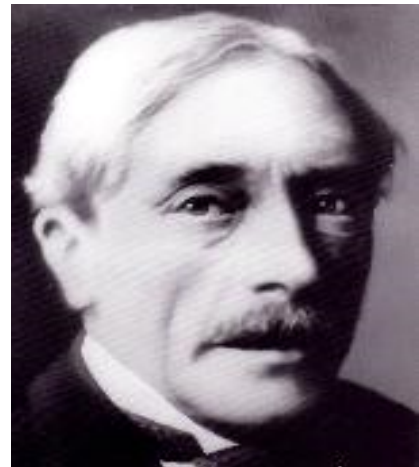
- **Introduction**
- **What is curriculum? What is life?**
- **Student Engagement**
- **Curriculum of Life:**
  - Nature
  - Justification
- **Examples/cases**

## **Part two, 11.45am to 1.15pm**

- **Challenges to enacting a curriculum of life:  
Deficit mentality and one size fits all**
- **Dealing with controversial issues:  
Role of teacher**
- **Cases/critical incidents of your own in  
relation to a curriculum of life**

*There is no theory, that is not a fragment,  
carefully preserved of some autobiography*

**Paul Valery**  
**(1871-1945)**



- **Identify an engaging learning experience and very briefly comment on why it was engaging for you.**

**The Zax**

**by**

**Dr. Seuss**







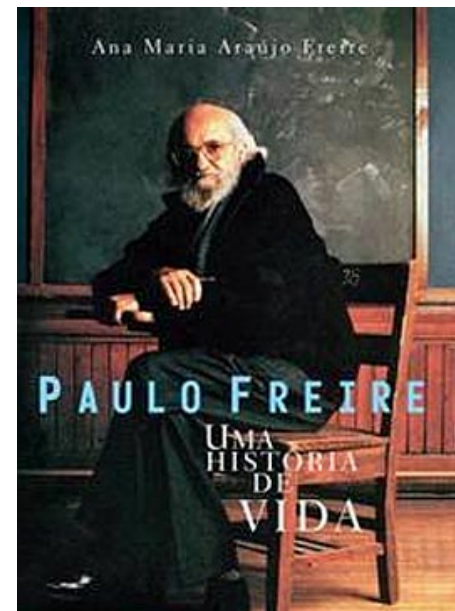
- What is Curriculum?
- What is Life?

# Conceptual Framework for a Curriculum of Life:

**Critical-democratic perspective**

Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice. Otherwise theory becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah' and practice, pure activism.

Paulo Freire



## ■ **Traditional conception of theory/practice**

- rigid dichotomy between theory and practice
- one-to-one correspondence between theory and practice
- to predict and control
- universalize (irrespective of context)

## ■ **Critical conception of theory/practice**

- Theory <---> practice: praxis
- Raise critical awareness
- Develop intelligent and responsible decisions and actions
- Difference in contexts – taken into account
- Human agency and creativity

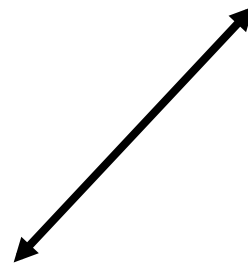
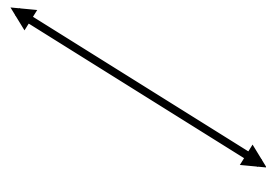
## **BELIEFS**

(human beings,  
politics, religion,  
language, the world  
etc.)

## **UNDERSTANDING OF CONTEXT**

## **DECISIONS**

## **ACTIONS**



**PRE-JUDGING**

# Critical-democratic perspective

- **democracy as a way of life**
- **critical inquiry**
- **dialogue and discussion, action**
- **open to different views**
- **free and reasoned choices**
- **public participation**
- **equity**
- **community**
- **creativity**
- **taking difference seriously**

# Critical-democratic perspective

Focuses on

- **critiques**
- **possibilities**
- **hope**

by asking:

- **In whose interest?**
- **Who benefits?**
- **Who is marginalized?**

## **Education and Notions of Success**

- **Contested concepts**
- **Important to clarify both concepts: one's views about education and success will determine one's conception and practice of student engagement**
- **What kind of education? What kind of success?**

## Education

**Open-mindedness**

**Democracy**

**Trust**

**Humility**

**Humour**

**Explaining**

**Critical thinking**

**Reasons**

**Intuition**

**Discussion**

**Social change**

**Love**

**Tolerance**

**Instruction**

**Integration**

**Self-reflection**

**Emotions**

**Inquiry**

## Success

- **Relational term**
- **Meaning depends on one's aims and criteria used to determine whether aims have been reached**
- **Example from literacy**
- **To determine success we need to focus on 3 aspects:**
  - **Aims/criteria: what values/norms are used to determine success?**
  - **Performance: does the students' performance match the aims?**
  - **Opportunities to learn: What support do the students/teachers/schools get?**

## Success, democracy and engagement

- **Different and competing notions of success**
  - Academic success
  - Public achievement success
  - What counts as a “frill” and “distraction”?
- **Democratic perspective allows/demands a variety of notions of success to operate at the same time rather than an insistence on one set of standards (one size fits all)**
- **A narrow notion of success yields a narrow notion and practice of engagement**

## **Student Engagement in School Life and Learning**

- **National study: 10 schools; 5 provinces**
- **Objectives:**
  - **What are the different meanings and forms of student engagement?**
  - **What are the conditions that enhance or restrict student engagement?**

## Engagement/Disengagement

- Engagement is not viewed *simply* as a matter of techniques, strategies or behaviours...  
Engagement is realized in the processes and relationships within which learning for democratic reconstruction transpires  
(McMahon & Portelli, 2004)

## Engagement/Disengagement

- For students to engage is not what is usually called 'time on task': responding to work-sheets, recalling facts or dates, or reading chapters of a text and answering questions at the end. **I want students to engage the way the clutch on a car gets engaged:** an engine can be running, making appropriate noises, burning fuel and creating exhaust fumes, but unless the clutch is engaged, nothing moves. It's all sound and smoke, and nobody gets anywhere.

**Robert Fried, *The Passionate Teacher* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995, p.2)**

## **Concepts associated with Student Engagement**

**Connections,  
relations,  
promise,  
belonging,  
inspired,  
motivated,  
attachment,  
concentration & effort,  
authenticity and responsibility**

**connectedness,  
commitment,  
closeness,  
involvement,  
interested,  
ownership  
integration,  
empowerment,**

## Concepts associated with disengagement

- **alienation**
- **isolation**
- **separation**
- **detachment**
- **fragmentation**
- **boredom**

## Student Engagement

Importance self-evident:  
who wants to argue against  
engagement?

BUT:

**Engagement in what and for  
what?**

# Qualities of Student Engagement

- **Not always observable**
- **Involves a relationship**
- **Implies hope, commitment and possibilities**
- **Takes time to develop**
- **Dependent on context**

## Conditions that hinder SE

- **Deficit mentality**
- **Negative self-image**
- **Low academic expectations**
- **Bureaucratic structures.**

## **Conditions that enhance SE**

- **Ensuring positive and appropriate representations of students by others**
- **Facilitating student construction of positive self images**
- **Developing engaging pedagogies**
- **Creating democratic communities**
- **Enacting a curriculum of life**

## Three conceptions of student engagement

- Some identify SE with the observable: students being on task, doing what the teacher demands and in the manner the teacher prescribes. From this behaviourist perspective, SE is equated with a *set of techniques and strategies*.
- From a perspective that focuses on individual growth, SE is equated with the *active participation of students* in projects and ideas relevant to them.
- From a critical-democratic perspective, SE is much more than technique, strategies, and participation. It is a *way of being* that grounds the curriculum and pedagogy in the students' lived experience (individual, social, academic, and political) and *enacts equity and social justice*.

# Context of Emily Carr School

- **Majority of children live below Canada's poverty line**
- **Arts-infused school**
- **Supplementary programmes:**
  - **Pre-school program**
  - **Peer mediation and conflict resolution**
  - **Community development project**
  - **Breakfast program**
  - **Reading buddies and reading clubs**

# Context of Emily Carr School

- **Recognize and account for social conditions**
- **Pedagogy of hope and not a pedagogy of deficit: not the curriculum of excuses and diminished expectations**
- **School-wide curriculum**
- **Locate the school *in* and *for* the community**

# Context of Emily Carr School

- **Leadership based on critical practice and democratic transformation: consistent with but goes beyond pedagogy of care.**
- **Illustrates a conception and practice of excellence that is fundamental to education in a democracy.**
- **Its excellence arises from the fact that the programmes in the school explicitly take into account issues of power, difference, and marginality.**

# Curriculum of life

- Curriculum as a **dynamic relationship** which changes rather than a fixed object (document, subject matter, plan, objectives, intentions, experiences of students).
- Appropriate metaphor: not implementing or covering or delivering but **enacting, living**. Curriculum becomes a **way of being** in the world.
- Curriculum not conceived as **open to possibilities** a noun but as a **verb** which is.

# Curriculum of life

- **Curriculum of life is different than making the curriculum relevant to or matching it with the students' experiences.**
- **The relationship envisaged between curriculum and life does not entail a direct linear or one-to-one relationship. It detests a narrow, utilitarian perspective.**

- **Curriculum of life takes substantive and controversial issues in the students' personal, social and political lives seriously – it does not shy away from the controversial. It does not hide behind the pretence of neutrality.**
- **Curriculum of life makes the hidden curriculum explicit. What traditionally had been pushed to the hidden curriculum becomes the starting point and the impetus for engagement and learning.**

# Curriculum of life

- **Curriculum of life discourages a deficit mentality of students and human beings; it believes in human possibilities of students without falling into the trap of romanticizing students to the extent that whatever students choose is acceptable.**
- **Curriculum of life is consistent with education as critical and democratic transformation.**

- **Curriculum of life is incompatible with the objectification of students. It encourages and supports “epistemological curiosity” and “rigorous searching” (Freire, 1998).**
- **Curriculum of life entails a conception of teaching that believes in the creation of “possibilities for the construction and production of knowledge rather than to be engaged simply in a game of transferring knowledge.” (Freire, 1998, p.49**

- **Grounded in the immediate daily worlds of students as well as in the larger social and political contexts of their lives, curriculum of life breaks down the walls between the school and the world. It is an approach that presupposes genuine respect for children's minds and experience – without romanticizing either. It is an approach that is inconsistent with a deficit mentality common in many schools. (p. 38)**

# Curriculum of Life

- By "curriculum of life" we mean a central, organizing stance that informs pedagogy, knowledge, school and classroom procedures and dispositions, evaluation, and how students, teachers, administrators and staff engage in the school. **Students and curriculum in this approach are not “managed” or “controlled” but “engaged.”** Curriculum of life is an approach to pedagogy that informs and gives coherence to often disparate aspects of school life.
- *John P. Portelli & Ann Vibert*

# Curriculum of life

- Social studies, language arts, mathematics, science, and art become “disciplines” in the sense that they are disciplined ways of thinking through important questions and concerns. **The curriculum of life is rooted in the school and community world** to which the students belong, addressing questions of who we are and how we live well together; **it extends into the larger world** of possibilities beyond school and community bounds; and it addresses directly **questions about the larger social and political contexts** in which these worlds are embedded.
- *John P. Portelli & Ann Vibert*

# Why a curriculum of life?

- **It's impossible to talk of respect for students for the dignity that is the process of coming to be, for the identities that arise in the process of construction, without taking into consideration the conditions in which they are living and the importance of the knowledge derived from life experience, which they bring with them to school.**

**Paulo Freire**

## Why a curriculum of life?

- **On the basis of three national studies in which we surveyed and interviewed hundreds of educators and students, it is very clear to us that educators and students are telling us that the curriculum of life is becoming more and more the irresistible content of the classroom. There are different ways how we can live a curriculum of life.**

# **Mentality of hope and possibilities**

**a shift from a deficit-thinking model**

**(that feeds on fatalism and lack of hope, and disregards systemic inequities)**

**to**

**a mentality of hope and possibilities**

## Traditional conceptions of leadership and inclusive leadership

- Individual (neoliberal) ...  
**Collective** (democratic)
- Hierarchical (deficit mentality, autocratic) ...  
**Horizontal** (possibilities and hope, participatory)
- Narrow ends (sameness, exclusion) ...  
**Wider and varied ends** (equity, inclusion)
- Antagonism  
**Agonism**

# Inclusive leadership

Leadership is a collective process in which many people work together in a variety of ways to make things happen

Leadership as collective influences process that promotes inclusion and equity [in a robust sense]

Professor Jim Ryan, OISE