

Significant Curriculum Issues

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What are the curriculum issues most in need of solution in today's schools? Some of these are delineated by Hollis L. Caswell, dean, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York.

THE CURRICULUM WORKER in American schools and colleges encounters many complex and difficult issues. This situation results from the operation of several factors which it is important to recognize and understand.

Highly significant is the fact that conflicts in philosophical, sociological, and psychological theories, when applied to education, take on practical significance in relation to the curriculum. Ideas about the purposes of education, the nature of learning and of the learner, and the role of the school in the community must be interpreted into courses of action by those who develop the curriculum. Where differences in these basic theories exist, curriculum issues arise; and the sharper the differences, the more critical the issues become. Ours being a time when many such differences exist, the curriculum worker is beset by problems.

Another contributory factor is the ever-increasing burden of responsibility placed upon the schools. Year after year needs of the young, once met largely by the home and other community agencies, have pressed more heavily upon the schools. Excessive accident rates on the highway call for driver training by the school, rising divorce rates call for education in sex and family relations, a rising tide of

emotional instability calls for personal guidance and counselling—these are but samples of the social needs that press for attention by the school. While these are important and schools must consider them, they present difficult issues to the curriculum worker who is already dealing with a greatly overcrowded program.

VARIOUS ISSUES CALL FOR SOLUTION

The American educational system is a tremendous social experiment. Our country is attempting to do what no other nation has done on anything like so comprehensive a scale,—provide extended educational opportunities adjusted to the needs and capacities of all the children of all our people. While this goal has been achieved only in part, we have been moving steadily toward it for more than a century. In the effort to provide such educational opportunities our schools have pursued a largely unexplored course. In this respect probably more than in any other have we departed from the tradition of Western Europe upon which our culture rests. In this departure many issues have had to be faced in curriculum development, and there are those that still call for solution.

It is factors such as these that cause the curriculum worker to be faced constantly with issues that present dilem-

mas in which either horn is equally uninviting.

It is the purpose of this article to suggest briefly some of the issues that seem to the writer to hold special significance in curriculum development at the present time. Space of necessity limits the number of issues that may be considered and permits sketching only the most salient points of those treated.

How Shall the Values That Guide Development of the Curriculum Be Determined?

The first problem area presented is extremely broad in scope but involves issues of most critical significance. The setting is provided by a world dominated by a struggle over competing value systems. Ideals developed through centuries of evolution in western culture and widely accepted by western nations within a decade have been violently challenged by Fascism and Communism. The defeat of Fascism, rather than eliminating this challenge, intensified it by weakening western nations and providing a setting in which Communism could expand at an unprecedented rate. This situation alone would make the determination of values one of the critical issues in developing an educational program.

But there is the further fact that within our own culture there are substantial conflicts over values. Accusations that schools are socialistic, efforts of various lay groups to censor instructional materials, and the requirement of teacher oaths are impacts on the schools from these conflicts. Various individuals and groups want to be sure that the values which the school is

fostering are consistent with their beliefs.

It is obvious that education must be concerned with values. Growth of pupils must be in some direction, for unless there are goals in mind, one type of learning is quite as desirable as another. Broadly, it can be said that the dominant ideals of the society in which the school functions determine the values that serve as a directive force in education. In our society, an institution would not be maintained at public expense, nor would it be countenanced within the law, to teach children to become pickpockets. Such activity, although carried on by a few individuals, is not approved by our social ideals.

But unfortunately the problem of determining the values that shall and do operate in curriculum development is complicated by many questions that cannot be disposed of in the easy way that it can be decided that children should not be educated to become pickpockets. That our culture is in a period of rapid change is well known to all students of society. This process of change affects social values most drastically,—both in interpretation and application. Some individuals and groups cling to older conceptions, while others believe that changed conditions require new interpretations. The result, as mentioned before, is that substantial areas of conflict develop. This presents a major problem for the curriculum worker, for he must make choices. He may elect to avoid the conflict areas, in which case he is accepting the concept that the school should take no part in the critically important process of value clarification and re-

formulation. Or he may take the position that the school should make a value interpretation, which means taking sides, and results in opposition by certain groups in the community to the type of curriculum developed.

The problem is further complicated by major differences in the values accepted by sub-groups within our society. Studies such as those by Warner, Havighurst, and Hollingshead show how dominant middle-class values commonly accepted by teachers come into substantial conflict with those held by children and parents from other classes, creating problems of greatest difficulty both for pupils and teachers. How these conflicting values should affect the curriculum is a matter as yet not generally accorded attention by curriculum workers.

The matter of determining the values which should guide the curriculum is still further complicated by the close relationship of values and religious beliefs. The contention of many religious leaders that a system of values must inevitably rest on religion raises the difficult problem of how secular schools may determine values to guide development of the curriculum without encroaching on freedom of the individual to decide for himself his religious belief—one of the basic guarantees made by our Constitution.

Recognizing with any degree of clarity the way in which values operate in a curriculum is a matter of real difficulty. Devising a procedure of curriculum development that puts into operation effectively a reasoned and accepted point of view concerning values is even more complicated. The values held by individual teachers, by the administra-

tor, by pupils and parents, by groups within the community, and by the community at large all exert an influence. Values operating below the level of conscious acceptance—often built in childhood by experiences long since forgotten—through the actions of teachers may influence the direction the curriculum takes quite as much as those that are consciously accepted on a reasoned basis.

Consequently, whether considered in terms of the great world conflict in which we are now engaged, or in terms of the dominant characteristics of our own culture, or in terms of developing an intelligent, reasoned basis of action for the individual teacher, the determination of values to guide the development of the curriculum is of major importance. A group of the most difficult and significant issues in education are to be found in this problem area. *Education and Morals*, a recent book by John L. Childs, defines many of the issues involved and presents one approach to their resolution. Study of this source will open up the problem for the curriculum worker in excellent fashion. It is probably fair to say that as yet the large group of curriculum workers have not clearly defined the issues related to values that curriculum development involves, and that procedures commonly employed in curriculum programs deal in a relatively superficial way with the determination of values.

How Shall the Curriculum Be Related to the Problems and Conditions of American Life?

The second problem area takes its setting in the period following the great

economic crash of 1929, when deep concern was expressed both by laymen and educators that the school curriculum be related much more directly than it had been to the problems our society faced. It was emphasized that education should make a direct contribution to the solution of persistent social problems such as unemployment, use of leisure time, conservation, housing, and health. During the recent war it was obvious that the nation expected the school to gear its program to existing conditions so that direct contributions were made to the war effort. This experience during two periods of national emergency brought into clear focus a concept that had been taking form gradually for many years, which was that the kind of education afforded by a school system should be determined to a considerable extent by the needs and conditions of the society that maintains the school. This concept has become a widely accepted guide for developing the curriculum of American public schools.

Currently, however, there are indications of major difficulties in applying this concept to curriculum development, as well as evidence of an inclination on the part of some people to question its soundness.

Efforts to relate the curriculum to social problems and conditions have taken a variety of forms. There have been numerous attempts to organize the curriculum so as to deal directly with social problems. As a result emphasis has been given to the shortages and weak points in our social structure and processes. Bad housing, racial discrimination, and like matters have received increased attention. Some text-

book writers not only have incorporated this emphasis into their books, but have proposed particular solutions to problems. Certain students of the curriculum have gone still further, holding that it is essential that the curriculum worker project his conception of the ideal society and organize the curriculum so as to contribute directly to its realization.

Since the war it has become increasingly evident that relating the curriculum to social problems and conditions involves controversial issues of great difficulty and importance. Strong objections have been raised by individuals and organizations throughout the nation to emphasis on points of weakness in our society. Attacks on *Building America* and like materials are indicative of an unwillingness on the part of some people to have anything taught that can be interpreted as suggesting a need for change in our existing economic and social arrangements. Attacks on textbooks and teachers as being socialistic often reflect a lack of confidence on the part of laymen in the interpretation teachers make of social problems and conditions.

Following the depression of 1929 there was a substantial movement in the direction of organizing the curriculum with direct reference to the functioning of society. Plans of scope and sequence based on areas of living, social functions, and social processes were designed to make the curriculum relate directly to problems and conditions of social life. While this movement no doubt has exerted a significant influence on curriculum planning, the fact is that this direct approach has largely disappeared, even though state-

ments of curriculum principles continue to assert the importance of social needs and conditions as guides in curriculum planning.

The present situation therefore is one in which the relationship of the school curriculum to the problems and conditions of our society presents issues of vital significance. These issues are intensified because of the numerous conflicts in our culture at this time. Trends toward greater governmental centralization and control, while having sufficient public support to be put into effect, are bitterly opposed by substantial groups in the population; a world outlook which would subordinate national interests is viewed as essential by some and by others as a betrayal of our country; moves toward greater equality among races, while welcomed by many, are considered a grave threat by others. Numerous conflicts of this type permeate our life at the present time. How should the curriculum be related to such social problems and conditions? What should be the guidelines in drafting an educational program suited to such a situation? Should a direct relationship be sought through curriculum planning? Such are the issues in this problem area. This area is opened up especially well in a recent book by Smith, Stanley, and Shores, entitled, *Fundamentals of Curriculum Development*.

How Shall the Curriculum Be Planned?

The third problem area, planning the curriculum, has two facets: one, determining the part various individuals shall play in planning; the other, deciding how the various elements entering into the curriculum, such as the

characteristics of the learner, subjects, and social ideals, problems and conditions shall operate in planning. Both of these points have been long-time matters of disagreement in curriculum development. They continue to be of great importance and merit most careful continued study and research.

The first of these points came to attention early in the curriculum movement because of questions concerning the respective roles of the expert and the classroom teacher in curriculum planning. More recently increasing attention has been given to the part the pupil himself should have in planning, and to the role laymen should play. Some curriculum workers would place almost complete responsibility for all phases of curriculum planning on the pupils in a given group and their teacher; others would give a school staff major responsibility for planning the general framework of the curriculum and the individual teacher full authority over detailed planning within the broad guidelines provided by the staff; others would follow still different procedures, giving varying degrees of emphasis to the participation of experts, system-wide committees, and laymen, as well as of pupils and teachers.

The second of these points has been one of the most persistent areas of disagreement in the curriculum field. The point has usually been raised by questioning the appropriateness of subjects as the basis of organizing the curriculum. The subject framework has been attacked again and again. Two other bases of organization have been suggested as alternatives: children's interests and needs, and some type of social analysis such as areas of living

or social functions. In spite of continued dissatisfaction with a curriculum organized around subjects, this continues to be the dominant pattern. At the same time experimentation continues with other approaches to organization, the core program possibly being the major variation given wide trial at the present time.

Certain major changes in the curriculum considered important by some leaders cannot be achieved without modification of the basis of organization. Yet, extreme difficulties have been encountered with every effort at such modification. Featherstone, in his recent book, *A Functional Curriculum*, contends that the conception of subjects held by many curriculum workers is inadequate. He presents a thoughtful analysis which indicates a level of examination that would be highly desirable of all the various factors entering into curriculum planning.

It seems clear that better resolution of the issues involved could be achieved if understandings could be deepened of factors such as the nature and function of subjects, the significance of developmental facts about children and youth for curriculum planning, and the relationship of social ideals, problems and conditions to the educative process. The definition and discussion of such matters should lead toward clarification of the basic issues in curriculum planning, and should also suggest practices holding promise for developing an improved curriculum.

Has Emphasis on Process Resulted in Too Little Attention to Objectives?

The next problem to be discussed is of more immediate origin as related

to curriculum work than the previous ones. For the past few years a matter of major concern has been the "process" whereby the curriculum is developed. This has been stimulated by a number of factors. One no doubt has been the conviction that earlier efforts at curriculum improvement often failed, or at least fell short of the goals set, because of the means through which change was sought. Decisions by individuals in positions of authority or by small groups on matters affecting the total teaching staff without doubt limited both the inclination and the ability of the larger group to make the desired changes.

* Emphasis on the "process" has been furthered by widespread interest in group dynamics. Group processes have been studied with greater care than ever before and some important insights have been achieved. New techniques of group organization and procedure have been devised which are being incorporated into curriculum work.

The result of these and other influences has been substantial emphasis in curriculum development upon "process." This emphasis has related both to the means employed in curriculum programs to improve the curriculum, and the way teachers work with pupils as the curriculum emerges in the classroom.

In fact, the emphasis has been so great as to raise the issue of whether appropriate attention is being given to what should be achieved. Not infrequently the impression is gained that the "process" is the whole show. So much attention is sometimes given to organizing groups, to using recorders

and observers, to "buzz" sessions, to measuring group participation, to creating a good group atmosphere, and the like, that too little thought is devoted to determining what the procedure is all for. Also, one finds that in working with pupils the position has sometimes been taken that it makes little difference what they study, so long as the "process" employed is a sound one.

It seems clear to the writer that in the past entirely too little attention has been given to the way in which things have been done and to the inevitable influence of procedure on outcome. Consequently, increased concern with "process" marks a desirable step forward in curriculum work. But also it seems quite possible that at the present time, in some instances at least, an imbalance has been created in the other direction, and that altogether too little attention is being given to the objectives and goals toward which education should be directed. The inevitable result is a feeling of being "all dressed up and no place to go." Workshops, while generally a valuable means of curriculum improvement, not infrequently display this weakness. The motivating force of purpose or goal is exceedingly important and when unduly minimized results in much ado about nothing.

At root, this is the recurrent issue of ends and means, one of the most critical problems in a democracy. It is probable that better understanding of the more fundamental aspects of this broader problem would assist the educational worker to achieve a proper emphasis in curriculum procedures on goals to be achieved.

How Can the High Level of Achievement and Leadership Needed by a Society as Complex as Ours Be Developed Democratically?

A problem of increasing importance is frequently pointed out by European visitors to our country. Compared with European schools they hold that we submerge the gifted pupil, with the result that our students are far behind their European age mates by the close of secondary education. There is undoubtedly something to be said for this point of view. Our schools represent an achievement of inestimable importance in providing education for the large mass of children and youth, but in devising a curriculum to serve this end the child with exceptional capacities and promise has probably suffered. For the most part it has been assumed that such individuals will find their way to the top. Many unquestionably do so, but two unfortunate facts in the situation must be recognized. First, there is a large number of highly gifted and able people who do not find their way into work commensurate with their ability under this hit-and-miss plan; second, those who do find their way to the top are not as well prepared as they might have been had their potentialities been recognized while in school and an enriched curriculum provided for them.

In our schools we have been greatly concerned with maintaining and fostering democratic attitudes and social mobility. The distinctions, for example, present in the English educational system probably would be quite unacceptable to most of our young people, even though the English schools do an

unusual job of discovering talented individuals and providing them appropriate opportunities. It is consistent with our tradition and social ideals to avoid a type of curriculum that "marks" the leaders and prepares them for their role. And yet it seems clear that the needs of our country during the years ahead, when we must assume ever heavier burdens of world leadership, require a great group of talented and exceptionally well prepared men and women in all walks of life such as we have never had before. In view of this situation curriculum workers should face the issue of how to design a curriculum to prepare such a group and at the same time preserve our democratic traditions.

ISSUES OF A MORE LIMITED NATURE

In addition to broad issues of the foregoing types there are other more limited, but by no means unimportant, issues with which the curriculum worker must deal.

In particular, within the area of procedures for improving the curriculum are many important problems. For example, opinions differ greatly on the usefulness of written materials—courses of study and other curriculum bulletins—in making curriculum change. Very little objective evidence is available on this matter. Yet thousands of

hours of time and substantial funds are spent each year in preparing such materials. In every curriculum program issues regarding the preparation and use of such materials must be faced. It is highly desirable that a more adequate basis be developed for resolving issues of this type.

In Conclusion

The large number of unresolved issues in the curriculum field may become a source of discouragement to curriculum workers. However, it should be held in mind that powerful forces, wholly beyond the control of the school, have operated to create this situation. As mentioned earlier, the curriculum is the point in education at which theoretical differences regarding purposes, the nature of learning, and the role of education become operational. So long as there are substantial differences of viewpoint in our culture regarding these matters, the curriculum worker must deal with controversial issues. There seems little prospect in the foreseeable future that our society will be free from such differences. Consequently, the curriculum worker should expect that much of his work will involve the resolution of differences of opinion and development of practices suitable to situations where differences exist.

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