

Gaps in Curriculum Research

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In this article Laura Zirbes, professor of education at The Ohio State University, discusses problem areas in which research is needed if we are to develop curriculum programs based on a vision of social purposes, an understanding of local needs and resources, and insight into the nature of the learning process. The author outlines a functional approach to basic curriculum research and design which gives promise of helping us find solutions to many urgent curriculum problems.

IT IS UNLIKELY that many of the readers of this magazine would deny the need for a critical and continuous study of curriculum problems and practices. But there is less likely to be consensus as to the nature of the problems, the foundations or basic assumptions in curriculum thinking, and the criteria for constructive planning and evaluation. Curriculum revision should be based on a true vision of the social purposes which education is to serve. It should proceed with clear understanding of situational needs and resources. It should be guided by new vision into the nature of learning, its conditions and contingencies. The creative coordination of these basic considerations calls for an evaluative type of experimentation in which values are related, projected, and studied in action. The curriculum process must be evaluated in terms of its impact and cumulative effects on individual and group living.

Flexibility versus Standardization

This process precludes the assumption that curriculum research should lead to a final formulation to be accepted and followed as standard. Such finality would be most acceptable to

those who conceive of curriculum resources and materials as texts. A standard curriculum would take much of the risk and bother of small sales out of the publishing business. It might not only reduce textbook costs, but also increase receipts from royalties. It would perhaps lift the lower levels of practice, but in so doing it would violate and deny values to which every teacher and administrator should aspire. Among these values are the consideration of individual differences, situational needs, and local resources, all of which imply flexibility and adaptability. Other values are those which relate to cooperative planning.

The cultivation of sound value judgments involves frequent opportunities for experiencing some freedom of choice coupled with voluntary commitment and responsibility. Arbitrary requirements and fixed assignments regulate and control, without contributing to the development of maturity of outlook, and this has a great deal to do with life adjustment and democratic citizenship. In this sense a liberal, liberating education is one in which curricular guidance cultivates sound, humane value judgments through all the growing years. Curriculum re-

search might well explore the possibilities of fostering and developing some of the significant values which the fixed curriculum blocks or denies.

Question of Curricular Patterns

But curriculum controversies are not limited to the basic issue of flexibility versus pre-planned standardization. The field is divided by issues which are represented by specific plans and patterns, claims and counterclaims. Proponents of particular curricular patterns are prone to distort the balance and relatedness of values in their pre-occupation with specific means. When the supporting lay public is confused by proposals and counter proposals it is disposed to entrench itself even more firmly in the status quo. Defensive conservatism and aggressive innovation may thus actually develop resistance to change and distract attention from urgent basic considerations.

Implications of Social Change

Argument and propaganda are far easier to resist than the mounting strains and pressures of cultural change which are impinging on all social institutions and services, including education. Adherence to precedent and tradition still accounts for curricular practices in many situations, although unprecedented social developments and recent significant contributions to knowledge are challenging education to reconstruct itself and its functions in a basic reorientation which would give it a major role in orderly social change and human betterment. In the acceptance of such a high challenge, education might throw off some of its outworn preoccupations and anachronistic

precedents. In this sense, the critical social issues and problems of our time are fraught with great significance for educational advance.

A vanguard of educational leadership needs to study and coordinate the implications of social change and fundamental research for the consistent reorientation of basic curriculum values and policies on the one hand, and for creative situational experimentation on the other. Since the realization of basic values should not be tied or limited to specific means, there is every reason to encourage initiative in the development of alternative approaches and situational adjustments.

Local curriculum research should undertake the study of situational needs and resources in terms of which adaptations and adjustments of curriculum should be projected. It should also explore and develop local potentialities for first-hand group experiences which provide starting points for widening social horizons and curricular extension in vicarious experience. Local research should also discover and develop opportunities through which children can identify with community concerns that have some relation to wider social concerns. These should include social action and broadening cultural contacts.

Local leadership should initiate, guide, and recognize cooperative curriculum study and research, and should assume responsibility for extending the social and professional horizon of the teaching personnel, so that wider contacts and information about new findings, new developments, and resources may provide the stimulus to professional aspiration and help develop readiness for curricular advance.

Research in Basic Disciplines

Assumptions concerning the curricular implications of motives and attitudes need to be examined in the light of recent findings in anthropology, social psychology, and psychiatry, if education is to make its contribution to the solution of problems of mental health, juvenile delinquency, racial and cultural discrimination, democratic morale, and world citizenship. There are many teachers and administrators who would then realize that the curriculum needs to be developed or adjusted in terms of findings and facts like these:

- Prejudices are learned and can be unlearned
- Rejection and lack of social acceptance are conducive to antisocial conduct
- Emphasis on competitive motivation is bound to favor the ablest and contribute to the frustration and failure of the less able
- Aggressive tendencies are usually indications of unfulfilled personal or social needs
- Dynamic urges usually seek and find indirect outlets when denied
- Unquestioning obedience needs to be outgrown on the way to maturity, to make room for intelligent self-direction, self-respect, and respect for the common good
- Fatigue, strain, anxiety, and tension call for timely release, rest, change, relaxation, recreation, or creative outlets if integrative behavior is to be fostered
- The shy, withdrawn, insecure, inhibited, and non-expressive child is usually a more serious case of personality maladjustment and a more challenging guidance problem than the extrovert
- The emotional immaturity of many adults not only complicates their own life adjustment but complicates the lives of their dependents and associates
- Respect for personality and individuality combined with democratic group dynamics develop potentialities which

regimentation and autocratic domination deny and obstruct

- Consistent democratic guidance differs as basically from laissez faire policies of letting children do as they please, as it does from autocratic control, in its procedures and in its effects
- An unrelieved sense of guilt, failure, or insignificance undermines mental health.

Functional Approach to Curriculum Research

Unstated assumptions on which certain widely used curriculum practices and materials are based need to be made explicit through basic curriculum critique and comparative analysis. While this is a philosophic rather than a statistical type of research, it is scientifically respectable and has significant practical bearings. When some of the older curriculum materials and practices that are still in wide use are submitted to such basic research, false assumptions come to light. Practices based upon them can then be questioned or discredited and compared with practices built on sounder premises in thorough-going objective analysis.

This is also the scientific way of developing and testing new hypotheses, and proceeding toward the experimental validation of promising new teaching procedures, curriculum proposals, and materials. It encourages critical, creative thinking and clears the way for basic educational advance. The process has parallels in recent basic advances in several sciences.

The functional approach to practical problems of design has been very productive in many fields. It has definite bearings on basic curriculum research and design. It breaks through encrusted traditions, discards precedents, and frees itself of fixed ideas about forms, pat-

terns, and materials, experiments with new ideas and materials, and then gets down to basic functions and values directly related to use. It develops a creative synthesis of these basic considerations in the process of designing beautiful and useful new implements for modern living. This approach has already influenced the construction and equipment of our schools in ways which provide better uses of space, and better arrangements for safe and sanitary school living.

Creative research might well consider and apply this functional approach in curriculum modernization. Traditional uses of the time available for education, hoary precedents for the grade placement of curricular material, conservative lack of curricular concern for social values, psychological needs, and cultural imperatives are some of the matters with which creative functional thinking and curriculum experimentation might well be concerned.

Curriculum research of a less drastic sort needs to use persistent problems as cues for inquiry.

★ There is, for example, the recurrent crop of failures in beginning reading, a serious curriculum failure which is not basically resolved by provisions for remedial work.

★ There is also the perennial problem of regression in arithmetic skills. While one process is being taught, one which was previously taught seems to lapse. Fractions are taught in one grade but forgotten by the next. This suggests a reduction of the segmentation of content and a curricular adjustment which keeps skills once learned from lapsing through disuse.

★ There is the problem of lack of carry-over which seems to crop up again and again. Does the curriculum make some unwarranted assumptions about learning which are responsible for this problem?

★ There are curriculum implications in attitudes toward formal homework and in the subterfuges to which many children resort in connection with it.

Resistance to Educational Advance

Curriculum research needs also to concern itself with the resistances to educational advance among which are certain fixed ideas and erroneous assumptions widely held by the lay public. Among those which need to be thus challenged because they obstruct curricular advance are the following:

- That the first five or six years of life, including infancy and early childhood, are relatively so unimportant educationally that public education need not concern itself with them
- that failure to learn what the curriculum sets out to be learned is usually due to lack of voluntary effort, which may be induced by pressure, punishment, threat of failure or failure, without harm to the personality
- that adjacent grade norms actually represent the two points of reference in terms of which every child in a given grade group should be held accountable, and in terms of which abilities within grade groups are typically confined
- that social and emotional maturity are relatively less important matters for educational concern than so-called subject matter and academic skills
- that play is only important as a relief from work in the school program
- that curricular concern for the arts is a relatively unimportant matter of teaching rudimentary techniques of such subjects as drawing and music, and an appreciation of a few standard works in those fields
- that habits should be fixed and made automatic as early as possible by a rigid process of conditioning
- that knowledge acquired by rote and tested by recitation or examination is the real test of learning

—that children learn only one thing at a time
—that certain good practices like the following have stood the test of time and are still unchallenged:

- a. The good old fashioned oral spell-down. The practice of reading each lesson orally, paragraph by paragraph, by turns, around the class.
- b. The regular assignment of home work, especially in arithmetic.
- c. Plenty of formal drill on the facts and tables.

This list could be extended, but education would rise to new levels if there were some effective way of discrediting these ten widely held but erroneous assumptions, and clarifying the implications for curricular change.

The unyielding narrowness which characterizes conservative concepts of curriculum and resistance to educational change confounds educational leadership. It cannot be reconciled with the realities of social and cultural change in related aspects of modern living, nor with the expanding role and function which our democratic society assigns to education. But cumulative evidences of educational advance indicate that conservatism is clearly on the defensive. Liberal values and broader conceptions of curricular content are proving their worth. Educational leadership is challenged to cope with the situation as an urgent problem in social engineering.

Clarifying Terms and Concepts

On the assumption that any movement concerned with a cultural lag must reckon seriously with semantic difficulties, curriculum research can perhaps make a major contribution by developing a glossary in which the diverse and

changing concepts and connotations with which education is concerned are clarified, ordered, and illustrated for common reference. Such a glossary would, of course, need periodic revision, but it would no doubt become a useful instrument in dealing with the misconceptions, confusions, and misunderstandings which obstruct and hamper curricular advance. Much of the energy now dissipated in futile controversy might thus be conserved and diverted to more constructive purposes.

What right-minded American would rise to attack the social studies or to defend the social heritage at mere mention of "curricular enrichment" if such a glossary were available to help him understand the meaning of this term and contrast it with the term "barren meagreness":

Barren meagreness: Assigned time to read and reread and recite on a single paragraph on the cultural developments of a whole period in a required history text devoted primarily to the chronology of political events and the detailed military exploits of a minor war.

Curricular Enrichment: Direct group experiences in which some of the historical and cultural influences of a period of history on current life could be observed and discussed; direct contact with some of the artifacts and relics of the period and with facsimiles of related historical source material; curricular provision for literary and informational readings in books, pamphlets, and periodicals and to pictures as vicarious experience related to the social processes of the period in question, to the personalities of leaders, and the cultural problems and achievements; discussion of these matters and reference to their vital relationships and implications to current life and history in the making; encouragement and opportunity for related cultural and creative activities in

music, writing, pageantry, and dramatics.

What confused teacher would fail to find some guidance and constructive suggestion for her role in curricular advance if the changing meanings of other key concepts were explained in similar fashion? What irate parent or school board member would become defensive about newfangled ideas if they were introduced and discussed by reference to such concrete, meaningful examples? If such a glossary had the advantages of organizational sponsorship and professional cooperation, it might achieve more ready acceptance and wide circulation at low cost. In time it might enable the profession and the public to recognize and resist the propaganda of vested interests and the willful misrepresentations projected to threaten professional leader-

ship and scare the public, or to vilify opposition and fortify the status quo in mock concern for the common good.

Progress Depends on Research

With so many new materials and resources for the enrichment of learning; with so many social problems and live issues that have curricular implications; with so many new sources of insight into human development and social adjustment; with so much cooperative organizational and professional concern for democratic leadership and educational advance; with increased public interest and community participation in school improvement; with the spur of the accelerating tempo of cultural change, the need for curriculum research and coordinated effort which will facilitate educational advance is more challenging than ever.

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