The Nature of Curricular Relevance

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OUR current concern with curricular relevance is by no means a recent phenomenon. In fact, two books [1] published in the 1930's (*The Saber-Tooth Curriculum* and *Experience and Education*) offer some of the finest and clearest sets of criteria available for the development of such curricula. Both Benjamin and Dewey possessed an awareness of the nature of learning that has not been excelled in recent decades.

Nevertheless, it also remains true that relatively few teachers have adequately put into effect relevant curricula which are responsive to the needs of children, individually as well as collectively.[2] For purposes of clarification, relevant curricula are defined here as those designed to meet students' needs as perceived by those students. That this is so is only partially the fault of teachers in general. Certainly, the demands of school systems for conformity on the part of teachers, centralization of authority and decision making, and a hesitancy on the part of educators, both teachers and administrators, to serve as statesmen on behalf of those educational concerns which they knew to be desirable have all contributed to the present dilemma.

The failure to develop curricula that are responsive to the needs of children is evident when one reads the professional journals; article upon article cites the lack of relevance in contemporary curricula, the need for relating school experiences to those which the children encounter in their broader environments, and the importance of the school as an aspect of the total community rather than as a separate entity in and of itself.

One of the most significant indications of the extent to which the schools have divorced themselves from the communities in which they are situated is the pressure being applied in our urban areas for schools to decentralize and enable local residents to exert greater influence on institutional policies.[3] The frustration and alienation which these people feel have only begun to surface, and we can anticipate additional pressures, which are fundamentally attempts to transmit control of the schools from centralized bureaucracies and impersonal school boards to the citizens most intimately concerned with the quality of education offered to children. Whether or not local control of community

[1] Harold Benjamin. *The Saber-Tooth Curriculum*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1939. 139 pp; John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books, Fifth Printing, 1966. 91 pp. (Originally published in 1938 by Kappa Delta Pi.)

[2] William Van Til. "The Key Word Is Relevant." *Today's Education* 58: 14-17; January 1969.

[3] For example, see the following: Board of Education of the City of New York. "Proposed Community School District: Detailed Summary of System Plans." *The New York Times*, Sunday, December 15, 1968.

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schools will result in improved educational opportunities for children remains to be seen.

There is little doubt that the existence of large concentrations of disadvantaged children, often Negro, who seemingly are unaffected by the schools which they are required to attend has precipitated this manifestation of concern for curricular relevance. The inability of schools to affect urban youth from lower socioeconomic groups has been amply documented; and this inability has continued to exist regardless of attempts to improve the learning environments in those schools. Pressures placed on the schools to educate more effectively the disadvantaged, the disaffected, and the alienated in both social and intellectual terms will increase as long as those persons view formal education as the prime route along which they must travel in order to enter the mainstream of society.

Incidentally, we should also be cognizant of the fact that most suburban schools are no more relevant than their urban counterparts. Miel [4] has succinctly portrayed the extent to which those schools have ignored the major social issues of our time and the degree to which their professional staffs were unable to cope with those problems even if they chose to do so. Basically, most suburban schools appear especially responsive to adults and only minimally responsive to children. They not only do that which the parents demand; they do it *in the way that the parents demand it be done.* To the degree that this is true, educators have abrogated their professional responsibilities in favor of "consensus education." Data documenting the extent to which suburban educators continue to ignore their responsibilities to the broader social community continue to accumulate.[5] It is, perhaps, somewhat ironic that the students are the only meaningful voice in our suburban communities currently demanding greater relevance on the part of the schools.

Criteria of Relevance

Some contend that there is not any "prescription" for teachers to utilize when adapting curricular content to meet criteria of relevance,[6] that each teacher must "use his intelligence in relating the required content to the world of the learner." If true, then any attempts to develop criteria for relevance by those who previously have been successful in a given endeavor would prove futile. Eccles [7] clearly implies that those aspects of human nature which prevent us from taking full advantage of the past experiences of others act as a deterrent to human progress and preclude the development of solutions to complex problems.

There are, quite clearly, certain criteria which have repeatedly been associated with the concept of relevancy and which have been espoused by philosophers as well as educational practitioners; and it is these which constitute the core of any "prescription" offered as a guide to those who must act at the front line and who are charged with the responsibility of translating such concepts into tangible educative experiences.

An awareness of the fact that there are characteristics which are not, and should not be, associated with the concept of curricular relevance is also necessary. Such curricula are not developed by children in an attempt to translate their personal interests into educational experiences; they are, rather, developed by teachers after intensive study of the students, their interests and aspirations, the immediate community, and the broader concerns of the total society. Second, it is not one with reference to which teachers play a passive role; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Third, the establishment of reasonable guidelines within which children must act is not left to the students; while the students may participate in their development,

[4] Alice Miel. *The Shortchanged Children of Suburbia.* New York: The Institute of Human Relations Press of the American Jewish Committee, 1967. 68 pp.

[5] Harvey Goldman. "A Survey of Efforts Made by Selected Milwaukee Area Suburban School Systems To Promote More Adequate Intergroup Education." Milwaukee: The American Jewish Committee, March 1968. 34+ pp.

[6] William Van Til, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

[7] Henry E. Eccles. *Military Concepts and Philosophy.* New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1965. pp. 21-26.

it is clearly the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that the behavior of the students is channeled toward the desired educative ends. Fourth, a relevant curriculum cannot be totally teacher-designed; the sheer magnitude of the task precludes any such eventuality and ensures that significant segments of the curriculum will be standardized and commercially available.[8]

At this point, turning to the criteria which constitute the conceptual framework on which relevant curricula are based, we find the following:

1. *A relevant curriculum is active rather than passive.*[9] It is based on the assumption that students learn by doing. In such cases, teachers' lectures or assigned readings will constitute only a minor part of the planned learning experiences. The school will also expand its concept of what constitutes the parameters within which children will be confined for educative experiences and will come to view the total community as a learning laboratory and a part of the curriculum. Children will spend a considerable portion of time testing hypotheses which they developed and learning to generalize both deductively and inductively.

2. *A relevant curriculum will deal with values.*[10] The existence of personal, community, and societal values, some of which are occasionally in conflict with one another, is faced whenever students are placed in a position where alternatives must be considered. While no educator should ever permit himself to adopt the indefensible position of attempting to teach children the "correct" values, neither should he exclude their consideration from the classroom because of their controversial nature.

3. *A relevant curriculum should be based on experiences with which children are familiar and in which they are interested.*[11] There are few, if any, means at the disposal of the schools to force students to learn. They will learn about the things which interest them. Thus, it seems only sensible for the schools to begin the learning process with areas about which the children are already motivated and ready to put forth effort.

4. *The learners must be guided into new areas of concern.* Since no one would argue that the children's interests should be the entire basis for a relevant curriculum, the teacher must be responsible for skillfully leading the students into additional areas of concern which emanate from their original interests. Since every area in which children can manifest interest has both historical antecedents and future implications, the teacher has a ready-made "ladder" along which to lead the children on a step-by-step basis.

5. *A teacher can present the same concepts to children within the framework of a relevant curriculum as are offered through more conventional curricula.* It is, however, anticipated that different materials and techniques will be utilized in arriving at the agreed upon goals.

For example, in second-grade social studies, the students usually study the community. Rather than relying as heavily upon the currently widespread approach of combined textbook and discussion, the children could spend more time gathering data about their own community and undertake the development of hypotheses relative to the nature of a community based on the data. With their teacher's assistance they could count the number of stores, service stations, one-family and two-family homes, apartment buildings, bars, churches, and abandoned cars and then utilize these data in the formulation of hypotheses. Questions could be raised about why some communities are composed of all Negro residents while others contain all white residents.

Concepts such as community cohesiveness and/or fragmentation, the influence of group morale, and the nature of community pride could be introduced. The students could attempt to figure out what a community really is, with the teacher helping them to approach the topic from the points of view expressed by such diverse disciplines as sociology, economics, anthropology, or psychol-

[8] Harvey Goldman and Luther Pfluger. "Multiple Curricula: A Strategy for Selection." *Educational Leadership* 26 (7): 688-92; April 1969.

[9] John Dewey, *op. cit.*

[10] Chris Buethe. "A Curriculum of Value." *Educational Leadership* 26 (1): 31-33; October 1968.

[11] Vincent Lanier. "The Teaching of Art as Social Revolution." *Phi Delta Kappan* 50: 314-19; February 1969.

ogy. Intra- and inter-community comparisons could be made. The historical derivation of their community could be explored; the future needs of their community could be studied, taking into account factors such as the technological revolution and current racial and/or ethnic conflict. Teachers and students could interview parents and other community representatives and the children could then integrate the insights derived from this process into their conceptual frameworks.

The teaching of language arts and reading could follow a similar approach. Students could utilize their social studies units as bases for writing stories of interest to them. In cases where children were unable to write, they could dictate their ideas to tape recorders, aides, or teachers. The compilation of these stories into loose-leaf "books" made available to all members of the class would provide them with relevant texts and also enable the teachers to deal with their classes as single units when necessary for purposes of group or individual reading.

Stories of this nature should focus on topics of interest to students. At the elementary level, interest in fields such as death, birth, space, flight, sports, personal fears and ambitions, family strengths and weaknesses, self-evaluation, and individual differences are likely to be manifested. Secondary students will quite probably examine such areas as dating, sex, ethics, ethnicity, racial conflict, the quality of the education enterprise, the "establishment," their conceptions of an equitable society, the use of power, and others which fall within the context of their normal out-of-school conversations.

Related Considerations

The fact of the matter is that the vast majority of teachers are now able to effect a relevant curriculum, and would do so if the necessary conditions were implemented. This is an especially important point for administrators and supervisors to note. Given the current conditions in the vast majority of schools, however, it is literally impossible for most teachers to develop relevant curricula.

First, the development of relevant curricula is largely dependent on a team teaching approach to instruction. The form that the teams take is incidental, but some carefully thought out cooperative approach to teaching children is necessary. If teachers are to meet the criteria of relevance they must have time during the day to think, to plan, to leave the building when necessary for instruction-related purposes, and to confer with one another.

Clearly, schools organized on a self-contained classroom basis do not, and cannot, provide such opportunities. It is only in some form of team teaching arrangement where teachers sometimes deal with large groups of children, occasionally with small groups or a single student, and at other times are not in contact with children at all that the needed opportunities will be available. Also, since no teacher can "be all things to all people," the pooling of professional talents that takes place in teaching teams facilitates the development of relevant curricula by making available to students broader ranges and types of competencies. Thus, the current demands being made of teachers housed in self-contained classrooms can only result in frustration and poor staff morale; the majority of teachers know what to do, and even how to do it, but are blocked by conditions inherent in the nature of their assignments.

Second, the relationship of building level administrators and curriculum supervisors to teachers will have to undergo considerable modification. This will, in all probability, also necessitate considerable change in their roles. The process through which teachers are normally evaluated by principals will have to be modified extensively. This should be a change that principals will be glad to see occur since they have not, for the most part, devoted enough time to the task nor been willing to face the harsh realities of attempting to define poor teaching. Once organized into instructional teams, the supervision and improvement of the instructional process wili become a built-in responsibility of the team, and one for which all participants will have to assume some responsibility; this is to say that the team will

have to assume responsibility for assuring its own effectiveness, and this will require the members to assist each other in improving the quality of instruction.

Supervisors, rather than continuing as personnel who help teachers improve their professional skills through the processes of observation, consultation, and demonstration, will instead become "translators of research," individuals who constantly scan the available research in their areas of concern and who organize small group seminars during which they work with teachers to help them become aware of the implications that such research has for them as they operate within their instructional teams.

Third, teachers will have to commit themselves to seeking solutions for instructional and interpersonal problems within their team structures or provide a procedure through which such matters can be handled, one possibility being binding arbitration by a person outside the team. In essence, the team approach to instruction requires that the members find ways to integrate their professional and personal skills into a smoothly functioning unit; those unable to do so, and unwilling to accept external mediation, may find it necessary to seek another school, another system, or perhaps even another profession.

In conclusion, it would appear that the development of relevant curricula is a task that teachers are prepared to undertake, but that it is unreasonable to expect them to do so unless related organizational and role changes which would provide teachers with the necessary freedom are also effected.

What this implies is that communities can have the kind of education they want for their children. And school systems can look forward to changes in their teaching staffs that will permit them to become more effective than is now the case. However, communities and school systems cannot hope to have these changes take place unless they too are willing to make some commitment to change within their own ranks that would provide teachers with an opportunity to be successful in their new roles. There are some indications that classroom teachers are now more inclined to make the necessary changes than are their administrative superiors who are caught in a web of internal politics and who view those operating at the "front line" with varying degrees of suspicion.

Until these concomitant changes occur, increased pressure upon teachers for "instant relevance" will only result in more militant teachers who will be increasingly content to rely upon teachers organizations to defend their integrity. □

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