Forces Influencing the Curriculum

A. W. Sturges

Opposing forces that affect curriculum are described as "Jacobin" or "Hamiltonian," with gradations between these two extreme positions.

We've come a long way.

The first American school's curriculum was simply designed to accomplish an uncomplicated task. Parents knew what they wanted; teachers were hired to teach courses; and students spent the day learning what the teacher told them to learn. Three hundred years later, 45 million students are being taught by over two million teachers at an estimated annual cost of $71 billion.[1]

Panoply of Forces

Trying to accurately identify who decides what will be taught is extremely difficult; the forces that influence educational content have increased in number and strength, but shifting and changing conditions and expectations vary the amount of influence any group can have on the curriculum at any one time.

We have been taught that education is the responsibility of the state, with strong local control; we also know that the federal government's influence increases whenever there is a real or perceived national problem to be solved with the school's help. We expect and want parental involvement in deciding the content. We also accept the fact that a great deal of money can be made by those who provide building equipment and instructional supplies and materials.

Almost every text in curriculum includes a section on forces that affect the curriculum. This section usually includes a list of groups or agencies such as school boards, state departments of education, regional and national accrediting agencies, the federal government, textbook publishers, and professional organizations. The list is almost endless; directly or indirectly, almost every individual, interest or professional group, industry, legislative member or group, or local newspaper can influence the curriculum. Consequently, it is almost impossible to accurately describe the strengths and the interrelationships of the various forces.

By grouping the interacting forces according to their interests in the curriculum, however, it becomes possible to see their varying strengths and, hopefully, to provide a method by which present and future forces can be easily recognized. Curriculum forces can be grouped, for example, by their influences on the learning styles offered students, and by their influences on the purposes and reasons for which students attend school.

Contrasting Learning Styles

The learning patterns or styles seem to range from a self-directed and individualized approach to a structured and organized one.

[1] National Center for Educational Statistics, Education Division. *The Condition of Education.* 75th Edition. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1975. pp. 40-42 and 58-60.

Ebel has described these two contrasting patterns. He points out that the first mode of thought has often been called:

> . . . humanistic, progressive, democratic, reconstructionist, or revolutionary. Some of its most articulate spokesmen over the years have been Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Dewey, Kilpatrick, and Brameld.[2]

Ebel goes on to say that:

> The other school of thought has been called conservative, traditionalistic, essentialist, or classical. Spokesmen for it have been Aristotle, Quintilian, Comenius, Herbart, Bagle, Broudy, Kirk, and Bestor. This second school of thought has much the longer history. But in the United States at least, the first has seemed to have had the more enthusiastic advocates, and the wider popular support. Until now.[3]

Ebel quotes Lippmann[4] to indicate that Jean Jacques Rousseau was a most influential force in revolutionary education. As a Jacobin,[5] Rousseau believed that external authority was evil; he believed in the goodness of human beings. At the other extreme are some American leaders (not unlike Hamilton) who believed government to be good and necessary, and that it should provide leadership for the people.

Thus, the two extreme positions concerning the way schools should be conducted could be referred to as "Jacobin" *versus* "Hamiltonian," with the terms placed on a continuum to illustrate the opposing opinions.

Purposes of the School

Why we have schools is another general ideational area in which a number of forces are contending in attempts to influence a school's purpose for being. One position might be represented by those schools whose purpose is to transmit information considered necessary and desirable, and whose students are expected to learn within established content and method guidelines. The contrasting position might be represented by those schools that encourage all students to learn what is appropriate for future professional success and for their roles as adult citizens.

Boyce[6] refers to the former category as "tribal-village schools," in which all members of a village take an active part. According to Boyce, in such schools students who "rebel against the system must be separated from the group."[7] There is strong adult and peer support of the curriculum; the value of the curriculum is not questioned by students.

Boyce's contrasting schools are referred to as "missionary-colonial." These schools operate "in an atmosphere produced by a group of students who want what the school has to offer."[8] Thus, student motivation draws and holds students. When students do not want an available program, they may be offered an alternate one, in the school's attempts to hold them in school.

Thus, these two extreme positions could be referred to as "tribal village" *versus* "missionary-colonial," and the terms placed on a continuum to illustrate the opposing opinions.

Assessing Forces

Diagram 1. combines the positions of Ebel and Boyce. For those schools that have reached agreement as to their purposes, forces that influence the curriculum can be determined with considerable clarity, and their relative strengths identified. For example, schools that fall into Quadrant C of Diagram 1. would probably have a rather fixed curriculum, with minimal variables, and a somewhat stable change rate (that is, adoption of experimental instructional approaches or dramatic curricular changes would be minimal). For schools in Quadrant A, the

[2] Robert L. Ebel. "Declining Scores—Why?" Unpublished paper presented at the North Central Association, Chicago, Illinois, March 30, 1976. p. 7.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[4] Walter Lippmann. *The Public Philosophy*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975. Quoted in: Robert L. Ebel. "Declining Scores—Why?" Unpublished paper presented at the North Central Association, Chicago, Illinois, March 30, 1976. p. 8.

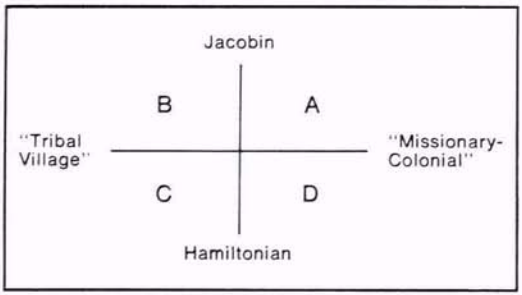
[5] A brief discussion of the Jacobin doctrine is included in: Walter Lippmann. *The Public Philosophy*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975. p. 73. A more detailed discussion of the Jacobin movement can be found in: R. R. Palmer. *A History of the Modern World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1963.

[6] E. Maxwell Boyce. "A Basic Theory for Educators." Unpublished paper. Athens: University of Georgia, December 8, 1975. p. 4.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 5.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Diagram 1. Opposing Forces That Affect the Curriculum



curriculum would probably be changing constantly; the need to change instructional patterns would place a heavy demand on new instructional materials and equipment, with accompanying needs for additional financial resources to support the changes.

Diagram 1. can also be used to illustrate the relationships among various curricular forces at the state, regional, and national levels. If a local school's perception of its role coincides with the perceptions of state and federal agencies, it would be reasonably simple to rank curricular forces impinging on that school by their degrees of influence. However, when the school, state, and national government's positions fall into different quadrants, various curricular forces often compete with one another, and it is difficult to rank the strength of the forces with any degree of specificity.

Divergent Needs, Goals, Programs

Movement on the vertical axis of Diagram 1. toward the Hamiltonian view would indicate increasing state and national influences. A state legislature's requiring the inclusion of a specific course or topic in the curriculum, or the national government's making monies available for a particular area of concern are illustrations.

Movement on the horizontal axis toward the missionary-colonial philosophy increases the demand for special materials such as video recordings, paperbacks, and learning packages. Schools in Quadrant A, for example, can absorb curricular materials from many sources; however, movement toward a tribal-village orientation decreases the demand for different materials, and increases the probability that schools will adopt textbook series, accept recommendations of content specialists, and follow other traditional practices.

The number of forces that directly affect the curriculum is increasing, but the influences of the forces on the curriculum vary among schools and are related to the patrons' agreement about the purposes of schools. It is important to remember, however, that schools consider survival to be a first priority; not unlike the followers of Maslow's hierarchy, schools must consider financial survival as their most critical area of concern. As a result, financially troubled schools will seek monetary assistance (with its accompanying control or restrictions); this sometimes creates a conflict of goals, especially for schools that fall into Quadrants A, B, and D of Diagram 1.

When there is little agreement among groups as to the specific purposes of the school, the curriculum tends to fluctuate (usually expand) to reflect the strengths of different forces. Under these circumstances, schools that lack agreement (located in the center of Diagram 1.) often have a number of programs and electives; their uncertainty of purpose is illustrated by the discussions, which occur each year, of the meaningfulness of the graduate diploma. While one group of patrons advocates the "return to basics," another group suggests that all students should receive a "relevant" or "skills-oriented" education. When a critical mass of patrons shows strong agreement, the school curriculum will reflect these concerns or, the patrons—if they have the financial resources—will form their own school to offer the curriculum they consider essential for their children. (Children attending schools that reflect parental agreement and support are often from rural areas and private schools.)

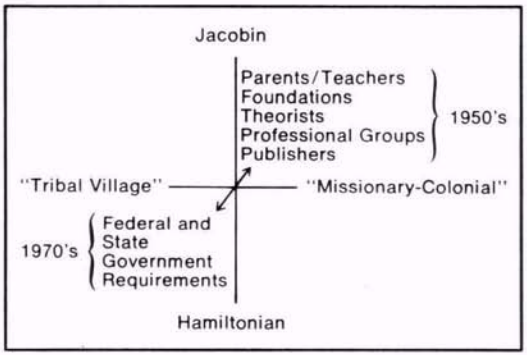
Influence of Financial Support

The same diagram presented earlier can be modified to show various forces that affect the curriculum. (See Diagram 2.)

Forces that meet the needs for survival are the strongest. Thus, agencies that append financial support to their wishes of curricular reform are most influential.

The federal government has more financial strength than state governments, and state gov-

Diagram 2. Forces That Affect Direction



ernments have more financial strength than school districts. Thus, federal decisions (for example, grants for "innovative" programs or for special interest groups and decisions on segregation/equal opportunity) must be recognized if a school is to survive. Similarly, state decisions (accountability requirements, text approval, mandatory state goals) must be recognized if a school is to survive.

Different forces have different degrees of influence on school programs. If the school district and the forces at work (notably federal/state influences) are in agreement, districts recognize the forces as supportive of their attempts to provide an appropriate curriculum for students. Alternatively, if there is no agreement, the external influences are considered negative forces that prevent localities from developing a curriculum for their own districts. Because financial support is critical, some schools selectively apply for federal/state monies for special purposes, thus introducing additional forces to the development of curriculum, as well as the requirement of meeting federal/state obligations.

A wide range of forces influences the curriculum designed for school children. Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.



Major Forces Emerge

Three major forces seem to be combining to present a most formidable challenge to local educational agencies in their attempts to develop a curriculum that reflects local concerns. The forces are:

1. Technology (especially mass media) that tells us of educational successes, concerns, and developments at the national and international levels;

2. The mobility and wealth of Americans, which results in students attending many schools prior to graduation and which permits student movement to or continued attendance at private schools to avoid the curriculum/instruction in other schools; and

3. Increasing national and state concerns for equal opportunity and minimal levels of competence, which make financial survival contingent on the successful fulfillment of state and national goals, requirements, and standards.

Disagreement among parents regarding definitive goals for schools contributes to federal/state leadership in curriculum. There may be, however, a rallying point in the parental concerns for "back to basics" and the movement toward requiring minimal levels of competence in basic skills. Currently, however, federal leadership in curriculum is assuming increasing influence in the absence of any concerted efforts by professional groups and patrons. Other forces (publishers, the press, manufacturers, and teacher educators) tend to react to the major forces, rather than to successfully compete with them.

It would seem that the major decisions on school curriculum are being made, and will continue to be made, by the federal and state governments, in that order. Other forces will have the *restricted* freedom to find alternate ways of coming to terms with federal and state decisions.

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