ONCE, when I was editing a magazine, I asked Alice Miel to contribute an article. “Alice, how about boiling down your book, Changing the Curriculum, to 800 words for the Intercultural Education News? Space limitations, you know.” (This type of request is constantly made by editors, an amazing breed perhaps more closely related to the fire ape than to mankind.) Alice said she would try. After she wrote the article, I told her how much we all liked it and added, “Now how about boiling down both the whole book and the article into a title? Short title. Summary of today’s curriculum approach.” Alice gave me a long steady look; then she said she would try. Several days later she phoned. The title was “Changing the Curriculum Means Changing People.” She couldn’t have been more right!

That changing people is essential to curriculum change is a basic idea behind modern curriculum work. It underlies stress on group process rather than paternalism or decrees, on participation in program building rather than handed-down courses of study, on broken-front advances rather than publicity-wise system-wide changes on paper, on conferences where all talk up through sub-groups rather than interminably endure Professor Doubletalk’s straddling in the Grand Ballroom.

Participating, belonging, experimenting, sharing have become key concepts in curriculum engineering. The group dynamics folks have invented a colorful language to explain all this. But, for my money, no one has ever explained better why people are important than two eminent laymen, Carl Sandburg and Jimmy Durante. Carl Sandburg in The People, Yes says, “Everybody knows more than anybody.” Jimmy Durante on the air any Friday says, “Everybody wants to get into the act.”

Nor have curriculum workers a monopoly on the insight that participating, belonging, experimenting, sharing change people and change the environment. Human relations research, labor-management studies, intercultural education investigations add their testimony. Further support comes from everyday observation and from logic. (Logic, according to Boyd Bode’s immortal definition, is horse sense made asinine.)

The new insight is one we should apply more often. The frontiers are innumerable. Take, for instance, the matter of effective policy-making by our many organizations in education: our councils, societies, associations.

Policy utterances in education often seem to be regarded as the modern equivalent of the oracle of Delphi. It is as though the gods on Mount Parnassus have spoken and naught remains for the common educator to do but go forth and live by the utterance. This atmosphere is created in part by the quality of the policy, which usually is excellent, and in part by the prestige of the sponsoring organization and the policy-signers. The oracular aura comes too from a certain literary quality. Policy pronouncements are frequently couched with a dignity, a sonority, a certainty, a finality which discourage discussion. Yet, all too often, little behavior change occurs at the grass-roots.

Now no one knows better than the policy-makers themselves that they are not Delphic oracles. Having sweated through many sessions around a table, having urged and compromised and reached a consensus, they know that the decisions are being made by earnest human beings
with histories, convictions, old scars, loyalties, drives. They fully recognize that the price of policy-making can be ulcers. And many policy-makers also recognize that the results of pronouncements often seem inadequate, despite Herculean labors at the conference table.

Why, then, do policies of many of our educational organizations flash brilliantly across the educational heavens, enjoy a brief heyday of notice—and end by having little effect upon the day-by-day behavior of the organization members in whose lives the policy must live if it is to be truly operational? Two theories are offered in explanation.

One theory offered to explain a lack of member participation, belongingness, experimentation, and sharing in policy-making, is the devil theory. Policy-makers in key posts do not trust the people; it is argued. In-groups want to stay in and impose their pet convictions on the membership. The result is monopolistic policy-making and its accompanist, farcical elections dominated by in-groups through nominating committees, “ja” ballots—devices which travesty democratic process.

While it is true that education may have its share of Hamiltonians in democrats’ clothing, I’m more inclined to believe that the root explanation lies in a second theory. Social engineering techniques to achieve effective membership participation in policy-making are lacking. Largely unexplored are ways of obtaining discussion of issues by many members, sharing results, crystallizing thinking, providing expression for minority voices too, following up with action.

Tired liberalism flourishes, fully equipped with rationalizations, when scattered attempts at membership participation prove abortive through unrepresentative attendance at national meetings or lack of response to editors’ invitations through magazine pages. Leadership in education seems to give low priority to the importance of people in effective policy-making.

At this time when democratic education faces many threats, application of the key curriculum concepts to policy-making becomes a critical matter. Consensus and action growing out of the participation, belonging, experimenting, and sharing of many is more than a promise. It’s a demonstrated reality. Alone, our Horatius’, however valiant, may not hold the bridge.