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 re-orientation 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 con-
siderations 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 con-
sider and apply this functional approach
in curriculum modernization. Traди-
tional 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 experimenta-
tion 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 reme-
dial 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 as-
sumptions widely held by the lay pub-
lic. 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 educa-
tionally that public education need not
concern itself with them

—that failure to learn what the curricu-

—lum 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 sub-
ject 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

Educational Leadership
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 homework, 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 harry 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 informational readings in books, pamphlets, and periodicals and 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 leadership 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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