

Curriculum Improvement: Who Participates?

WHO should participate in improving the curriculum? To the modern democratic educator, the answer does not seem to be difficult. All who are affected should participate. Parents and other members of the lay public, teachers and administrators, children and youth. So it seems that our question is answered. You need read this issue no further.

But if the answer is as easy as this, why isn't the curriculum everywhere throughout the nation improved through the participation of all affected? What should be done everywhere seems clear enough. Follow the principles of good group process. Have everybody in for study and agreement. Carry out the mandate of all. Selah!—the result is curriculum change supported by everyone.

This happens mostly in Fairyland. Why?

The Road to Agreement Is Rocky

Successful group work is a difficult business. Many group members have difficulty in accepting and even more difficulty in living by the basic principles of group process. Stuart Chase summarized these principles well in *Roads to Agreement*. Successful agreement involves genuine participation with everyone getting into the act. It involves the release of group energy into constructive channels. It involves clear communication among all and a mutual understanding of semantics and logical traps. It involves willingness to consider the facts first, as in the scientific method, despite thirst for theoretical controversy. It involves

the participants' feeling secure while afloat on the risky seas of group consideration.

The people who must come to accept and live by such principles, if agreement is to be achieved, come from highly varied economic, social, religious, and political backgrounds in an age of anxiety and in a culture in conflict. They perceive each other quite differently. Their personality patterns are deeply set.

Impossible, then, to achieve roads to agreement? Not at all. As American folksay puts it, in this country the impossible just takes a little longer to achieve. Not impossible. But not easy either. Not to be exorcised by the voodooism of a single socio-drama at the opening of a conference, useful as socio-drama is.

Plenty of People Are Included in "All"

If all who are affected should take part, everyone in the school community should be in on the improvement program. Here's a tough one too. Everyone is quite a few people, even in Crossroads, U.S.A., as well as in a Los Angeles or New York City area surrounding a school. If we settle for representatives, there is a problem of proper balance among groups. If we settle for samples, there is a problem of achieving a fair sample. Granted that fair representation can be achieved, many who are affected will be left out. Without personal participation in planning, they may feel uninvolved and may regard their representation as merely nominal.

But assume we can get fair repre-

sentation in planning sessions and, through ingenuity in reporting back and through use of instruments, some involvement of many others in a more distant and a less personal relationship. Assume planning sessions use group processes skillfully. Many agreements and shared actions will result. But agreement by all on everything is unlikely in as diverse a society as America.

Should total agreement be insisted upon as a prerequisite to action? Though the democratic and peaceable Quakers answer yes, some students of group action fear that the price of total agreement may be too high. The price may be long periods of inaction while the disagreement waits in the freezer, cooling off. Or the disagreement may be irreconcilable, as a democrat's difference in ideology from the authoritarianism called communism. Or the price may be obfuscation of real differences, specious agreement on generalities, with "operators" then free to interpret supposed consensus as they will. So some regard total agreement as strictly for the totalitarians.

The Question of Highest Loyalty

The knottiest problem of all may be the proper responsibilities and relationships of those who make up "all who are affected." Specifically, what are the responsibilities and relationships of the professionals and the public? Who decides what? Discussion of this is usually between those who compare education to medicine and those who say that education should follow public mandates.

Those who use the medical analogy argue that educators, like doctors, must diagnose and treat rather than have laymen prescribe, else what avail the careful training and practical experience of the specialist? Those who

urge following popular mandates say that since the schools belong to the people, educators should assume leadership yet always recognize that decision-making in education, all the way from broad-policy making to decisions on technical details of teaching phonics, belongs to the people. This latter position usually includes a democratic faith that the people will study the facts, will support full and free inquiry, and will judge well.

But another dimension should enter this discussion of responsibilities and relationships of the professionals and the public. The attempts to capture man's mind through capturing his children's schools never cease. Suppose the people of community X—not a minority but whatever you usually mean when you say the people—decide to reject free inquiry. Suppose the people of community X want indoctrination of a set of not-to-be-examined but claimed-to-be-good answers on certain economic, social, religious, or political issues. Yet the educators in school leadership positions in community X believe that there can be no freedom without freedom of the mind and consequently support the method of intelligence. The people of community X reject freedom of inquiry. The educational leadership of community X regards freedom of inquiry as fundamental. What, then, is the modern democratic educator's highest loyalty? What should a man do? (Or, reversing the question, suppose the educational leadership of community X, not the people, rejects free inquiry and sponsors some claimed-to-be-good imposition?)

Valid But Not Easy

Frederick Lewis Allen is responsible for the immortal statement, "Everything is more complicated than it seems

to most people." Apparently this applies to improving the curriculum through the participation of all. The easy answer, "All who are affected should participate," remains valid. But it doesn't remain easy. And it doesn't answer some related problems.

So maybe you should read this issue, after all.

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Parents and Staff Cooperate in System-Wide Improvement

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Frequently, as the individual school attempts to develop an instructional program to meet its unique needs, evidence appears that its efforts are not coordinated with those of other schools within the system. In Corpus Christi, this problem is being met through system-wide coordination between the Curriculum Council and the Parents Council.

THERE have probably been as many attempts to involve teachers, parents and students in curriculum improvement as there are schools. The approach to this important activity has varied greatly—from "selling" and "telling" to genuine attempts to involve all three groups at the "grass roots" level in every step and procedure of curriculum development.

No more than a quarter of a century ago educators conceded to experts the right to determine the curriculum. Specialists in subject fields wrote textbooks which even today largely set the pattern for what is taught in the classroom. Experts wrote courses of study which teachers tried to carry out verbatim. Following this era school systems began to involve small committees of teachers in developing courses of study, which were usually inflexible and based upon content found in text-

books. A more recent improvement over the course of study is the teaching guide which provides help in methods of teaching and more flexibility of content. Both the course of study and teaching guide are based upon the assumption that a small group of teachers can become experts and pass on their expertness to teachers through written communications.

There are obviously many problems which arise when curricula are developed through procedures indicated above. Most significant of all is that such procedures largely ignore the wealth of experience and background of teachers, parents and students which are so important in planning and developing modern, life-experience curricula. Not infrequently, teachers are unable to use effectively courses of study or teaching guides developed by others because they have not had an

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