

Child Development Implications for Curriculum Building

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What difficulties do we face in drawing upon human development research in planning for the best possible learning for each child? This article presents some implications of these findings for curriculum building.

MUCH of what we take for granted in modern education is actually quite new. In less than half a century there have been revolutionary changes in point-of-view, relationships, procedures and content. These changes have resulted from thousands of patient studies in a number of different sciences. Out of these studies have come principles explaining child growth, development, behavior and learning. The influence of these principles on educational planning has already been profound. One has only to study the fact-finding report of the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth¹ to realize how sweeping the changes have been.

Nevertheless, despite all our advances, we still have to realize the implications of our sudden new knowledge for curriculum building. We but dimly perceive the scope of the implications for educational planning suggested by the research in human development.

Every Aspect of School Living

Decisions and policies concerning procedures and content of curriculum

¹ Helen Leland Witmer and Ruth Kotinsky, *Personality in the Making*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1952.

are no longer easy to make. Research findings have made it necessary to enlarge our concept of curriculum. Curriculum cannot be defined as anything less than the total range of experiences, relationships and conditions provided under school auspices. This is far more inclusive than a course of study. Every aspect of school living becomes part of curriculum.

Moreover, each child brings to school with him the total impact of his out-of-school living. He comes to school permeated with the special social milieu in which he is daily immersed. And so of necessity every aspect of the child's living outside of school becomes a part of curriculum.

Furthermore, it is only what a child takes into himself from his own experiences that continues on in time and modifies his behavior, and therefore is actually curriculum *for him*. Research has made it clear that a number of processes—organic, social and psychological—influence development and learning. Each child makes his own synthesis from the interaction of these processes. In the last analysis the factors determining how and what a child learns lie within himself.

Only that which is self-discovered, is self-appropriated, is assimilated in ex-

perience, and that which significantly influences behavior, is learned. The accumulating evidence from studies of the nature and development of human beings seems to indicate that there is no *teaching*; there is only *learning*. If this is a sound assumption, any process of curriculum building must focus on the nature of the individual learner and on the learning process, not on teaching methods, and not on a prescribed body of content to be taught.

Difficulties We Face

It is awareness of such concepts as the foregoing that has created increasing dissatisfaction with traditional means of curriculum building designed to produce courses of study or guides of various kinds. But curriculum planning based on the nature of the learner and the learning process is beset by difficulties and problems.

Part of the difficulty is that the knowledge we need from pertinent research is widely scattered throughout the various sciences dealing with human beings, and is often written in a language not easily understandable to all who need the information. Even the practitioners of one science may have difficulty understanding the specialized language of some of the other sciences.

Another difficulty is that the results of research often reach teachers in the form of generalizations and principles without the supporting facts. For example, teachers read and hear that the "whole child goes to school," but rarely do they learn the multitude of facts needed to put meaning into the phrase. Consequently, the principles are often misunderstood and wrongly applied, or

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not applied at all. The principles become clichés and their meaning is lost. Curriculum builders are lulled into believing they are doing what the principles imply because they have repeated the words.

Still another difficulty is that even when the knowledge is available and understood it is not easy to see the implications for our dealings with children. The proverbial blind men and the elephant aptly illustrate the situation. Each research finding seems to suggest a direct implication for education, and there is a strong temptation to establish policy on this partial basis. But when the research findings are considered together in their totality and wholeness, the implications of each specific finding are by no means so direct and clear-cut. To make educational decisions on the basis of one or of a few specific findings in the research and to ignore the totality of the findings is unscientific and unsound. The accumulation of research has shown that a human being is a many faceted whole, and *all* aspects of each child's development must be taken into account if we wish to influence his learning.

There is still another difficulty, and it is perhaps the most perplexing of all. To build curriculum in terms of the optimum growth and development of the individuals, the goals must be clear. Means without goals are futile. In educational planning we are not always clear in our goals. We give lip service to much that we do not actually

believe or desire. Consequently our planning is contradictory and confused.

What Are the Implications?

These thoughts on the difficulties of drawing upon human development research in planning for the best possible learning for each child suggest a number of implications for curriculum building.

The following are neither inclusive nor comprehensive. They are intended merely to open up some areas of consideration.

1. Those who wish to learn to improve curriculum must acquire a thorough and detailed knowledge of the scientific findings concerning all aspects of human growth and development. Broad generalizations and conclusions are not enough.

2. Colleges and universities could well build into their curriculums the experiences of continually gathering pertinent data from the accumulating research in many sciences, and of putting the pieces of research into a synthesized whole which would contribute to the development of total concepts.

3. Those who wish to learn to improve curriculum must also study children as individuals. Each individual is unique. Records of each individual's growth, development and behavior through time should be basic data for curriculum decisions. Evaluation of growth and progress, too, can be based only on such comprehensive data.

4. Those who wish to prepare themselves for curriculum building must patiently and objectively observe the behavior of individual children and seek to understand its meaning. The results of such intimate study can be

a revelation and a richly rewarding experience. There is in the human organism a wonderful urge to grow, to defend itself, to make adjustments, to expand its capacities, to fulfill itself. Even when there are serious deficiencies the organism goes to great lengths to make up for these.

Children *want* to learn, to know, to "be able." They do not have to be "teased" or "techniqued" into growing. When we become aware of a child's internal struggle, and of his struggle with the external forces which challenge his dignity, we must inevitably gain a great respect for this child and a deepened realization of the potential integrity and dignity of the human being.

Persons who have once perceived a child in this way are ready to learn to make use of the implications of the principles of human development for curriculum building.

5. Only those who live and work with children day by day can add significantly to our understanding of ways of working with children. It is the *teacher* who must become aware of the infinite possibilities of childhood and make provision for their realization.

6. The administrative staff will also have to be involved in the direct study of children in the same intimate, detailed way. Subtle insights, learnings, understandings that result from rich experiencing cannot be communicated to others who have not had similar experiences. A program that is not deeply understood cannot be properly administered.

7. Children, too, must be participants in curriculum building. The classroom, where a teacher and a

group of children seek to understand and improve their living, has to be the center and laboratory of curriculum building. This does not mean that daily activities should be on the basis of "self-demand" or that the child's immediate interests should determine the content. Nor does it mean a superficial kind of teacher-pupil planning of already prescribed subject matter. The developmental point of view makes it necessary for us to explore *with the child* his resources, and to set with him new goals and aspirations by building on current needs and interests. In order to learn, an individual must participate actively and thoughtfully, aware of the process of learning. There will be no need for artificial awards, for the achievement will be its own reward.

8. Parents also must be involved in a partnership with teachers to a degree unexplored at the present time. Any given moment in a child's life is a transition point in a stream of experience dependent upon past ones and setting boundaries to future ones. To understand a child and to plan for his learning, teachers need basic information that only parents can give.

9. The involvement of parents in curriculum building means that they, too, must become acquainted with the scientific information available and and with the facts of development of each of their own children.

10. Methods of curriculum building also will need to be changed. It is no longer possible to construct curriculum with bulletins that lay out fixed plans like blueprints. Curriculum is not a document, it is a process. Being a process, it is in flux. It is continually

changing with changes in the children and in the community, and with the acquisition of new knowledge and understanding. If curriculum is an on-going process, the building of curriculum also has to be on-going, constantly requiring study and modification.

11. Nor can curriculum study and plans any longer be made by a committee that hands on the conclusions to others to use. Evidence shows that changes in practice are more likely to occur when teachers act on the results of their own study and experimentation which they have undertaken in an effort to solve problems that are important to them.

12. If experimentation and resultant action are to be effective, those who desire to improve curriculum must learn gradually and with increasing skill to use the scientific method. When decisions are based on abundant and valid evidence, the changes made in curriculum are bound to be sound.

13. Experimentation such as the foregoing obviously requires the joint efforts of those who will be expected to implement the findings. It will be necessary, therefore, for participants in curriculum building to study and practice group process.

14. What is the end of all this effort? We come around full circle to one of the problems with which we began, the most perplexing of all of them, the problem of defining our goals. If we discipline ourselves constantly to answer, "To what end?" "What is the purpose?" about everything we do, we will gradually come to perceive what our goals really are and what we actually believe.

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