

Curriculum Content—and Change

“Curriculum content,” “promising practices”—these terms include many elements. In a modern school, they are considered to be closely related to the setting, the resources, the materials, the climate, the techniques, the opportunities, the activities, the experiences that influence learning. These two terms include the cultural heritage *plus* the relating of it to the learner. They involve, as this journal issue indicates, the organized bodies of subject matter, the prevailing philosophy and objectives of the school, the values that influence school people and others in the choice and presentation of content, the organization and administration of the school, the social and psychological climate (the “unseen curriculum”) that so strongly affects growth and development. All these elements relate, directly or indirectly, to curriculum content and to practices that are—or are not—promising. And all these elements *are subject to change*—whether through impulsive action, administrative fiat, or through intelligent, cooperative choice.

How frequently today pressure is exerted upon the school to introduce a special subject area into the curriculum, or to place new emphasis upon an old subject, if student interest in the topic seems to be slipping. Often the person or group making such a demand for school time and attention has little regard for the havoc which such an arbi-

trary readjustment might cause in the school life of the children or teachers involved. Perhaps the demand lies in the area of increased competitive sports, or foreign languages in the elementary school, or additional requirements in science or in mathematics in the secondary school, etc.

Those who make such a demand upon the school usually justify it almost exclusively in terms of “adult needs” or “needs of society.” These are important arguments and, of course, cannot be ignored in organizing the curriculum. Yet good school people, if they are true to the best they know, will insist upon maintaining an “open forum” as the most satisfying means of deciding how the instructional program will be determined. They will want all persons concerned, including parents and children, represented in drawing up a picture of what the program should include. They will encourage all to have a say in marshaling organized resources and opportunities and in deciding how these are to be related to the needs of the children and young people in their school.

In recent years some hostility has been apparent between the “liberal arts” specialist and the so-called “educationalist.” Perhaps this tension develops rather naturally because the former proclaims his allegiance to a single area of knowledge or of content; while the latter is usually a person who

works to keep open a means for identifying and evaluating the needs of the children or young people before determining content. Mistakenly, the subject matter specialist may begin to regard the school person as someone who is either woefully "ignorant" of the liberal arts area involved or is definitely hostile to its introduction into the instructional program.

One element in this situation is that the subject matter specialist often oversimplifies the total needs of the school population and of the individuals who would be affected. Often he can see only his own area, and does not realize that other areas may be of equal significance to other individuals. He knows the rigor and the demands of his own discipline; he knows the rewards of early and complete devotion to his special subject area. He feels, therefore, an obligation—a compulsion—to fight for more time and attention to be given his area in the general school program.

The professional school person, knowing the diverse and varied population of today's schools, realizes that this viewpoint must be questioned. He knows the impracticality and danger involved in adding course upon course to an already overcrowded curriculum. He tries to avoid arbitrary shifts in the instructional program. He knows, and operates on the principle, that schools in our culture are dedicated to the meeting—insofar as possible—of the educational needs of *all* individuals. He knows, though, that our school resources are limited—by budgets, by traditional organization of the school program, by conventional concepts of what the school

should or should not accomplish, by shortages of teachers, classrooms, equipment, etc. To meet the educational needs of the individual in our society is a tremendous responsibility. It demands the use of insight, aptitude, knowledge and skill. It demands that any resource upon which improved understanding and enlightened behavior may be built must be made available for use.

The school person, then, cannot afford logically or otherwise to be hostile to any area of organized knowledge. He *can be* opposed to overemphasis upon any one particular area and to methods of introducing it that will warp or disturb the development of the child or young person involved.

The subject matter specialist sometimes needs a clearer understanding of the school person's responsibility. Only then will he appreciate the school person's constant admonition that time and opportunity must be given for all those who will be affected by a program change to participate freely and intelligently in any decision regarding the change.

When the educator insists that an open forum be maintained in relating children's needs to their cultural heritage and to current social realities, he is *not* and cannot be merely and solely a referee or a neutral observer. He cannot divest himself even in part of his basic values and his educational beliefs. He cannot operate simply as a person who stakes out an arena and lets the contestants bruise each other at will. The instructional program should not be an instrument shaped only by varying pressures and conflicting interests. It should represent the

finest gift the past and present can make to the future. The instructional program should be selected cooperatively, with sensitivity and intelligence, and made available in a setting characterized by freedom and mutual trust.

The professional school person has a significant specialty—that of dealing with process, and of setting up an area in which democratic processes can operate to initiate and support curriculum change. Results of such change will be more lasting and satisfy-

ing than would adjustments made through coercion, intrigue, or program manipulation at the administrative level.

Content change, resulting through use of the method of intelligence, in a climate of permissiveness and social interaction, will help to achieve an improved quality of learning.

—ROBERT R. LEEPER, *associate secretary, ASCD, and editor, EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP.*

Final Announcement

COOPERATIVE CURRICULUM RESEARCH INSTITUTE

April 29-May 4, 1956

Pere Marquette State Park, Grafton, Illinois

Purpose: To offer guided practice in dealing with problems of cooperative research to improve the curriculum. To achieve this purpose, attention will be given to three operational areas:

- 1) Experimentation for improvement of the *content of the curriculum*
- 2) Experimentation with the *organization of the school* for the improvement of instruction
- 3) Experimentation for the improvement of the school's impact on *children's self-understanding and their relations with others.*

Sponsored by: The Research Commission of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development with the collaboration of:

Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation,
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York City
National Training Laboratories, NEA, Washington, D. C.
School of Education, New York University, New York City
College of Education, Ohio State University, Columbus
School of Education, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida
Illinois Curriculum Program, Springfield
College of Education, University of Illinois, Urbana
San Francisco State College, San Francisco, California

Registration: Limited to 50 persons with leadership responsibility for curriculum research conferences, workshops or institutes and to individuals with leadership responsibility for curriculum improvement. Registration closes March 10, 1956.

Cost: \$50.00 registration fee
\$50.00 room and board

Request application form from: Robert S. Fleming, Chairman
ASCD Commission on Research
1201 16th Street, N. W.
Washington 6, D. C.

Copyright © 1956 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.