Letters to the Editor

Design for Higher Education

Oakland, California
December 29, 1956

Editor, Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

I have just read R. L. Henderson's pithy article on the faults and foibles of higher education which appeared in the November 1956 issue. In his column, "The Importance of People," he points out some of the things he believes colleges and universities are doing to make sure that liberal education ends on commencement day.

Now I agree that the university needs an overhauling—perhaps even a new model, but what is the design to be followed? Is Henderson merely a dissatisfied consumer or does he have a plan for correcting the evils he decries? Perhaps Dr. Henderson could be constrained to present his proposals in an early issue in his column.

William S. Weichert
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Oakland Public Schools

Editor's Note: Dr. Henderson was furnished a copy of this letter prior to press time. For his response to this challenge see page 365.

Bases for Choice of Content

Columbus, Ohio
December 30, 1956

Editor, Educational Leadership

Dear Sir:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on Louise Tyler's interesting letter in your January issue (p. 261-2). I am flattered that she found my article on "Choice of Content" in the March 1956 issue of the journal worth reacting to. Her letter is a helpful extension of the argument.

Mrs. Tyler does not wholly agree, however, with the way the approach was made in the article. The nature of her disagreement is significant, and I shall comment on it.

I implied that a consideration of the nature of man is a sufficient basis for an analysis of the curriculum. Mrs. Tyler considers such a basis insufficient. She argues that several basic areas would be required in a curriculum theory, and that "... curriculum specialists (should give consideration to) some theory about the basic areas in which assertions are made ... and ... try to develop some consistency ... from area to area."

The question is, what is basic? Mrs. Tyler suggests that theories of knowledge, learning and society would have to be included in any basic theory. I agree that the relationship between such bodies of theory would have to be clarified. But there are two levels of theory involved. It seems to me to be helpful to regard theories of knowledge, society and learning to be instrumental to a basic theory that would relate the nature of man to the choice of curriculum content, not
coordinate with such a theory. To regard such theories as coordinate with one another would ultimately lead us into the same confusion some people live with now, as they dichotomize subjects and children, school and society, and so on. Moreover, viewing these theories as coordinate does not help us to sort out operational goals and ultimate goals, so that we are left arguing uselessly, for example, whether some specific knowledge, or skill in the learning process as a whole, is the more important. Such arguments as these can get nowhere, since they are based on too segmented a notion of the purpose of the school. What is required is a simple and unified series of propositions from which to erect a curriculum, not a set of series, each in a different (but coordinate) basic area. I think that such a theory is to be found when one takes the whole man as the proper object of education, and takes the formal disciplines, society, and existing theories about learning to be instrumental to an understanding of the whole man.

It seems to me that what the curriculum specialists should be doing is to consider, not several "basic" areas, but several conceptions of what it means to be a human being. We have, in fact, been doing this for a long time, though not explicitly. The needs theory, from which we have derived much that is good, is one such conception. Others are strongly implied in the Cardinal Principles, and even in the Reports of the Committees of Ten and Fifteen. However, it seems to me that Allport's formulation, to which I alluded in the article last March, is more penetrating than any of these.

If the choice among contending conceptions of what it means to be a man can be considered as an issue in this field, then many more familiar issues fall into place. For one, what are we to think about the formal disciplines? Each of them claims to deal with man as a whole. Can we afford to act as if they did not exist? For another, what view shall we take of the school-community relationship? The view taken by the superintendent, whom Mrs. Tyler quotes, an administrator who looks out of his window and sees contending pressure groups as the most pressing reality he faces? Where shall we derive authority to act? From an authoritative analysis of what is needed to make a whole man? From a compromise among conflicting views? From a public opinion survey?

The great problem for the practicing educator is to reconcile the expedient with the important. Whether we feel "up" to doing it or not, we shall finally have to undertake this hard task ourselves. Nobody else really has to. People outside of education can feel that their duty has been done when they have called attention to educational needs as they see them; it is up to us to act on our own interpretation of what we hear them say, what we ourselves have learned, and most of all on what we ourselves have come to believe. I emphasize this because we have often acted as if our personal beliefs didn't matter; even as if we shouldn't have personal beliefs. We have acted, that is, as if our main task were to strike an average among the beliefs of others. In the short run, this may be expedient. In the long run it is disastrous—and some of us have lost the confidence of non-educators because we have seemed to make an art of uncertainty.

One reason for my gratitude to Louise Tyler is that she extends an argument that should be extended.

ARTHUR W. FOSHAY
The Ohio State University
Columbus

March 1957