

Politics and Curriculum

Dwayne Huebner

A RESEARCH column should be a marshaling of facts and findings which point to new directions for study, or to new fulcrums for control of educational action. However, as the editor of this column recognizes, research has two parts—the “search” and the “re.” Empirical considerations should be uppermost in the REsearch phase, for only through empirical means are the instrumental values of findings identified and their power for influencing educational actions tested. Hence, the need for the curricular REsearcher to be conditioned by social science methodology. Yet other considerations must be uppermost in the RESEARCH phase, for during search activity fruitfulness for educational thought becomes more important than power for educational action. The curricular RESEARCHer must consequently be conditioned by the methodologies of the imaginative enterprises—primarily poetry and speculative philosophy.

Approached from this point of view, to explore the relationship between curriculum and politics means to search for new language forms. These need not have immediate empirical validity. They are sufficient if they spark the imagination into new formulations of curricular phenomena. Dufrenne states that “the world speaks to us; it comes and lets itself be caught in the snare of words” (3). The juxtaposition of curriculum and politics does not generate new sounds

in the world, but provides new snares which may catch these sounds. Imaginative searching must always be ready to doubt the efficacy of existing language, and must attempt to keep language supple, refreshed and alive. By starting from a new vantage point, old problems may disappear and new questions may emerge. The attempt in this review is to freely speculate about curricular phenomena from a political orientation. Every positive statement should be prefaced by “perhaps . . .” or “might it be that . . .,” for this is not an attempt to state what is, but to suggest ways of talking about curricular events.

Struggle for Power

A central term in political science is “power” or, if this is too harsh on ears conditioned to the reverently intoned “democracy,” then “influence.” For instance, Lasswell and Kaplan define political science as “the study of the shaping and sharing of power” (7). As the educator searches for professional status and responsibility, he should not forsake the search or struggle for positions of influence or power. One of the unfortunate characteristics of the oversimplified democratic ideology, which implies that everyone should get in on the act, was a tendency to ignore this fact of social life. The leadership function, and the power qualities which go with it, were

diffused among the total educational group until legitimate power figures were conceived primarily as process leaders. To be a leader with power and influence does not imply that totalitarianism is necessary, that immorality will result, or that power and influence cannot be shared. Yet the fact that power and influence exist and are *necessary* need not be hidden from view by oversimplified versions of democracy, nor need it be legitimized artificially by a professional ethic of responsibility.

To keep the phenomena of power, and its quest, in the open and talked about is to make these less frightening. In turn the professional curricular worker should be less defensive when he awakens one day to find that curricular decisions are being made by someone else, for this fact simply implies that the professional has lost control by default or by not recognizing that power and influence are never

permanently institutionalized, but always available to the individual who has the know-how to gain it. It is tempting at this point to move into empirical investigation and to ask, "Who, in fact, does make or influence curricular decisions or actions?" Other directions may do more to illuminate curricular phenomena.

The foci of control, or of the struggle for power and influence, may be considered to be the actions which occur in, or in conjunction with, the classroom and the symbol systems which identify values, provide directions and expectations, legitimize actions, and foster solidarity. The individuals or groups who can influence classroom action or curricular symbol systems, are curricular leaders—whether in the classrooms or out, professional educators or lay citizens. Traditional curricular theories, proposals or statements have done little to lay bare the network of factors which determine



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classroom action, or to highlight the significance and operation of symbol systems in curricular activity. Two reasons for this neglect may be postulated.

First, a curriculum has been identified as a position, course of action, or series of events or experiences which has stability, a truth value, or some more or less absolute value. Thus educators argue over the purposes of the school, the goals to be achieved and the ideal curriculum. It seems more efficacious to conceptualize curriculum as social policy—a continual realization through classroom actions of the beliefs, values, expectations and desires of those in positions of control. As with any social policy, some commitments from the past carry over to influence present policy (2). Yet more significant is the constant, and necessary, struggle to have that social policy serve the interests of the dominant group and thus to keep abreast of the changing social scene. So conceived, curriculum can never have a final, complete design of absolute value; it is always in the process of becoming, of change, as is society itself.

Therefore the term, curriculum making, is a misnomer; for a curriculum is never made—it is always in process. Even the term, curriculum development, leaves something to be desired, for it also carries the connotation that development can reach a stage of completion. To identify curriculum as social policy at least throws it into the seething cauldron of social and political action, and participants become policy determiners struggling with and against others who wish to establish other policies. Those who make or develop a curriculum may well feel that those who struggle against them are destroyers, or inhibitors of development, rather than participants in the quest for policy determination.



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The other reason for this neglect has been the desire of the curricular writer to influence by intellectual argument only. Thus proposals are usually philosophically consistent statements about the function of the school, the characteristics of students, and the way to organize programs for goal achievement. The proposals have depended upon the force of intellectual or rational arguments to convince others of what should be done. Unfortunately, in the determination of social policy there remains some irrationality. Consequently, there is need to mobilize emotions, feelings and actions through non-discursive symbols, perhaps even emotive arguments. Furthermore, social policy in education is much too complex to be contained by the rather limited range of behavioristic language presently used in curricular writing.

Of course the curricular specialist wishes to be rational and to maximize

his intellectual grasp of phenomena within his domain. Within the next 100 years educators may have more effective intellectual tools for their jobs. Presently they do not, but they must still act. Hence the irrational must be accepted and dealt with as sanely as possible, not swept under the rug of enticing but imperfect behavioristic theories. Curricular proposals and writings need to be seen within the broad functions of symbolic activity. The pervasiveness of the symbol in today's world makes the functional analysis of the symbolic sphere a complex task (7), which can only be hinted at later.

The significance of the control of classroom action and curricular symbols for more or less traditional concerns of curriculum can be most effectively developed if the usual questions of the curricular worker are ignored and two other primary questions are asked. The central

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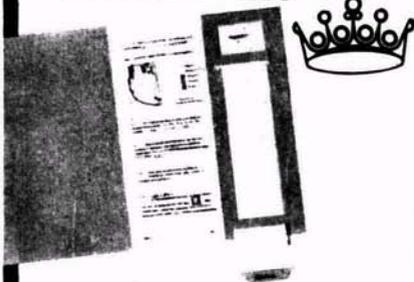
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problem faced by the teacher, and in turn by other curricular workers, is "What can and shall occur in the classroom tomorrow, or next week, or next year?" Related to this, but of minor significance for this analysis is the secondary question of how the activities of today are or can be related to the activities of yesterday and tomorrow—the problem of time and sequence. The second major question is, "How is value assigned to or realized through classroom action?" The usual problem of goal setting and evaluation is only one aspect of this question. It is obvious that the first question relates directly to the political control of curriculum through the influencing of classroom action. It is less obvious that the control of the symbol sphere is a political device for influencing both classroom action and the valuing mechanisms. Brief attention will be given to the first, while more detailed attention will be given to the second.

Sources of Power

Classroom activity may be influenced by controlling the input of resources, broadly conceived, into the classroom, and by controlling the sanctions applied to classroom personnel from outside the classroom. The basic determiners of classroom action are teachers with given competencies and skills, material and symbolic resources, pupils with given characteristics, and quantities of time. Classroom action may be influenced by controlling any one of these determiners. Individuals—administrators, board members, college teachers—responsible for the hiring, placement and preparation of the teachers exert control over classroom actions. Whoever controls the availability, selection and purchase of resource materials or the speci-

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cation of subject matter content has power over classroom action. Here the power of board members and administrators may be shared with teachers, students, Congress through the NEA, and commercial interests. The individuals responsible for the assignment and grouping of students and the allocation of time also exert control over classroom action. Therefore, individuals seeking to control the curriculum need to identify the power they have over any resources which determine classroom action.

Equally important are the sanctions, the rewards and punishments, which may be applied to classroom personnel. Clearly administrators and supervisors have formal and informal sanctions available. Tenure, assignments, salaries, committee loads are formal sanctions; while esteem, prestige, friendliness, and compliments are informal sanctions. Yet fellow teachers also have sanctioning power by virtue of their social contacts and signs of approval, disapproval and belonging. Custodians may bestow privileges on teachers they favor and thus influence classroom action. Parents and other community members may apply sanctions through complaints, praise, invitations, or by influencing their children to act in certain ways. The mobilization and use of sanctioning power, e.g., the ability to blow up a storm in the community, becomes a significant means of determining classroom activity. A political analysis of who controls classroom activity involves not simply identifying *who* has power or influence, but who has power over *what resource* inputs or who can apply *what sanctions* to classroom personnel. Because not all of these sources of power involve conscious decisions, a simple decision making paradigm does not uncover all political influence.

The control of the symbol sphere is

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even more elusive, hence political domination here is more subtle and analysis more difficult. It may be postulated that the symbol sphere, in this case primarily the language system used by educators and laity, serves four functions. It clarifies and shapes value, provides directives for action, legitimizes or rationalizes decisions, and serves as a visible symbol of group identification or solidarity. Writings in or about curriculum fail to discriminate among these various functions; and, consequently, the separation of propaganda from philosophies and from theories becomes difficult. Furthermore, the potential power and effectiveness of curricular writing is weakened by the failure to make these discriminations, for too many writers feel the need to be all things to all teachers.

The identification, clarification, and shaping of value is an essential task, not limited to the educators. As social policy,

classroom action should maximize values of those in control. Professional educators, of course, assume responsibility for maximizing the values of the laity. Yet when they fail some segment of the population interested in education, then that segment may move in with its own value statements and do verbal battle with the entrenched educators. The educational leader must be a politician in the sense that he must balance the demands of various interested groups or lose effective control of the educational enterprise. Rapid and far reaching social changes require constant reshaping of values, and because no segment of the population can possibly see or anticipate the significance of social change, constant dialogue and intellectual differences are necessary. A monolithic structure tends to hide difference. Consequently, there is a need for many different groups, with quite different interests, to be talking and writing about education and the curriculum. Conflict is often necessary for significant value clarification.

Shaping of Classroom Action

Given value statements which identify and clarify values to be maximized, the educator then needs some directives to guide the shaping of classroom action. Educational theory here is very inadequate, for the dependency upon an economic model and a learning technology has all but destroyed imaginative formulation of significant questions. The educational myth which states that goals must be identified, and then learning activities devised to reach these goals, is appropriate for the evaluation functions, but hardly an adequate model for curricular planning. The educator does need clear and valid directives, but a means-end model and a psychology of learning

are not the only vehicles for identifying these directives.

As teachers and curricular workers make decisions, they need some rationale to back them up, or to legitimize their action. A clear statement of value and of directives may serve this end. However, these are not always possible or desirable. Parents may not understand the technical rationale, or the language which shapes the values. Yet they may understand that a professional organization recommends this course of action, or that research proves it to be effective. Rationalization and legitimation are necessary if new actions of teacher or educator are to be readily accepted.

Finally, the symbol systems provide a basis for collective security, reinforcement and solidarity. To realize that one shares the same beliefs and secrets or knowledge as another may create a bond which facilitates group cohesiveness and consequently increases the effectiveness of political action. The slogan systems of the progressive era, and indeed today some of the expressions from Bruner's *The Process of Education* serve this unifying function. At one time the statements of philosophy of individual schools served this purpose for the faculty.

The symbol systems, and hence these four functions, are generally controlled by the intellectuals, the journalists, and the propagandists. By making available coherent and seemingly meaningful philosophies, theories, impassioned appeals, and criticism, those who control the symbol systems influence the thought and eventually the action of teachers, other educational workers, parents, and lay citizens. The symbol systems enable teachers to structure classroom action and provide value frameworks against which people outside the classroom can assess information originating in the

schools. On the basis of these assessments they act to sanction classroom personnel or to tolerate and accept what seems to be going on.

This system of ideas, generated by a political orientation, could be and should be developed further. The concept of power suggests that because teachers, administrators, college teachers, and non-professionals have different control points or different types of decisions and sanctions, they might also need quite different ideologies. The educational search for an acceptable curricular theory or philosophy might actually be hiding the need for quite different curricular points of view for various groups of educational workers. In other words, current curricular theories or proposals are simply not adequate for grasping and shaping today's curricular problems and possibilities as these emerge within a political framework.

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National Studies—Frazier

(Continued from page 105)

able. This is already notably true for elementary mathematics.

The national programs themselves have had to learn that in-service education is needed for all teachers, not just for a few, and that the aim should be an understanding of new purposes and the structure of meanings as well as or perhaps indeed instead of merely knowledge of new content and familiarity with how to use the special teaching materials for a given course.

Needed Next Steps

Obviously, as we move into greater local concern for new purpose, structure and content, we are going to need to tie in the base of in-service education very closely with the process of curriculum development. The national studies are providing us with great riches for use in our in-service program. They also are stimulating us to relate new purposes to those we may still wish to hold to for our pupils, our community, and our conception of the good society; to enlarge the structure we have of valued learnings to include new or undervalued concepts and generalizations; and to open up the choice among possible kinds of content more widely than before.

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