

THE GENERALIST— HIS UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION

HOLLIS L. CASWELL

THE roles that generalists and specialists should play in developing the curriculum have been a matter of dispute. This issue arises from the relative emphasis that should be given to general and specialized education.

When knowledge was comparatively limited in scope, all students could pursue essentially the same curriculum. In modern times this changes drastically. The rapid expansion of knowledge made specialization essential. The stage was set for conflict between persons who were concerned with the general education of students as non-specialists and those who were interested in developing a high level of competence in a limited field of study.

Following World War I many academic scholars and educators criticized the extent to which specialization influenced the curriculum. They asserted that the curriculum did not relate adequately to the lives of students. Its significance was primarily that it made possible the study of subjects at higher levels of specialization. Great interest arose in the general non-specialized education of students and much curriculum experimentation was undertaken.

The degree of specialization decried at that time was mild compared to that which exists today, for knowledge has increased at an unprecedented rate since World War II. As specialization increases, the concern of subject specialists tends to move further away from using the knowledge in their fields to deal with situations non-specialists encounter. The problems of the citizen, the homemaker, the person with leisure time, the individual seeking a better understanding of life's values, and youth searching for jobs swamp our society; but these problems are given short shrift by most subject specialists who exert great influence on the curriculum.

The many subject committees currently in operation, under the guidance of

specialists from graduate faculties in arts and science, exert the dominant influence on the school curriculum today. The central concern in these committees is to develop programs that will lead students to achieve a body of concepts which give understanding of the subject as a field of study. Relatively little attention has been given to aspects of living to which the subjects can contribute behavioral outcomes, a central goal of good general education.

Once again the great influence of specialization is being criticized. For example, Professor Earl McGrath, former United States Commissioner of Education, states on the basis of extensive studies that non-major students find practically no encouragement to study subjects because of their general educational value. He indicates that significant work in general education has almost disappeared. Dr. Alvin Weinberg, a distinguished practitioner in the field of science who is Director of the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, has characterized some of the work of national committees in mathematics and science as dangerous, calling the curriculum plans "puristic monsters." Other scholars have expressed similar concerns.

A Balance of Emphasis

The fact is that both specialists and generalists must contribute if a sound curriculum is developed. There are three areas in particular in which over-emphasis on specialization leads to weakness. It is in these areas that the general curriculum worker has unique contributions to make.

1. One area in which the generalist must make a vital contribution is the development and consistent implementation of sound general objectives as a guide in all segments of the curriculum. General objectives are of great importance because they provide an educational program, direction and unity. If goals are lacking in clarity, breadth or consistency, the educational program will lack these same qualities.

General goals are derived from the basic values of the society that supports an educational program. Philosophers and students of society are concerned with these values. But their formulations are in general terms. They suggest the direction education should take but leave a great gap between their statements and specific teaching-learning experiences. This gap must be filled if teachers and students are to have meaningful guidance for day by day activities.

A curriculum developed by subject specialists alone does not bridge this gap. With many unrelated committees at work, the resulting curriculum does not possess consistency of goals and of procedures for utilizing them in guiding the experiences of pupils. If the student is to achieve an optimum education, the teacher must understand how each specific objective in a subject fits into a configuration of purposes which foster a sequence of development that contributes to the accepted general goals of education. It is a central responsibility of the general curriculum worker so to work with the many specialists who are essential to developing a good curriculum that this outcome is realized.

2. A persistent curriculum problem has been the achievement of desirable sequence or continuity in the experience of the student. In the years following 1910 a strong feeling existed that the curriculum was a patchwork of subjects and activities with the result that the greatest cumulative effect in pupil achievement and the most economical learning were not realized. National committees studied articulation and local and state school systems experimented with new types of curriculum organization.

A curriculum developed on a single subject basis with primary concern for achieving understanding of the subjects as fields of knowledge lacks the kind of continuity that enables the student to relate learning to living or knowledge in one field to that in another. Many of the most significant problems and concerns of life require subject matter from more than one field for understanding.

The problem of developing a truly sequential curriculum must be approached with a view of the total educational offering. Those who solve it must see across subject and grade and school boundaries. They must be able to build a whole of educational experience that is larger than the sum of its parts because of the mutual support and interrelationship of the parts. Only general curriculum workers are in position to assure this characteristic by leading the many specialists who should contribute to the curriculum to reach beyond their subjects, viewing them in relation to the total school experience of the students.

3. The curriculum through the years has developed by a process of accretion. As new fields have been added their proponents have had to fight hard to secure a place for them in the school offering. The result is that the emphasis given to various studies is determined substantially by historical development and by the relative strength of their supporters. A lack of balance results.

The only way out of this difficulty is to employ a procedure that provides for an impartial review of the educational potentialities of all fields of study at each level of instruction, and that formulates a guiding set of priorities. These priorities should not be determined by the pressures of special interest groups, by legislative action, or by the particular likes and dislikes of individual teachers but rather by analysis of the comparative contribution each field of study and activity may make to the growth of individual students and to social well being.

This task of developing a reasoned balance of emphasis upon various areas of study is one in which the general curriculum worker should lead. He should coordinate the contributions of specialists in subject matter fields, in developmental psychology, in educational philosophy and sociology, and in methods of teaching. Only through such leadership can a sound general plan of curriculum organization be achieved. The general curriculum worker must be out in front in planning and implementation if a sound curriculum is to be achieved.

—HOLLIS L. CASWELL, *Marshall Field, Jr. Professor of Education and President Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University.*

Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.