

Curriculum specialists may increase their effectiveness by focusing upon both the content and the process of change.

Curriculum Reform and Social Behavior

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A TIME lag exists between the recognition of a need in education and the implementation of a program which purports to meet this need. Support from the Federal Government has made it possible to develop new programs with unprecedented speed. However, considerable time elapses before the long and arduous process of diffusion is complete.

The curriculum changes of the present are a consequence of the earlier concerns of the society. The changes that are presently having the greatest impact upon the schools result from the concerns of the '50's and '60's. World War II and the subsequent cold war caused the nation to focus upon maintaining technological superiority over other nations. The firing of Sputnik intensified the concern for developing better programs for training mathematicians, scientists, and engineers.

The original concern with the development of new curricula in math and science has expanded to include English, social studies, and foreign language. Scholars from the various academic disciplines have played a major role in developing the new programs. As a consequence, the new curricula have been organized around such specific academic disciplines as history, literature, and physics. Less attention has been given to the broad fields of social studies, English, and science.

In the new programs the former emphasis upon the acquisition of knowledge has shifted in the direction of greater concern for developing an understanding of the major concepts of a field. Teachers have been urged, through various media, to use methods which will encourage students to discover generalizations through inductive processes. This approach is designed to help students understand the methods of scholarly inquiry within a discipline.

A Need for Direction

While the new programs tend to have certain elements in common, they do not clearly define a new direction in education. This lack of direction is not surprising

when one considers the fact that the programs have been developed in isolation. One of the important priorities in education is to develop a clear picture of the contribution each of the new programs makes to the accomplishment of clearly defined objectives of education. This is essential if the schools are to be responsive to the needs of society; and indeed, if they are to play an important role in determining the character of that society.

The curriculum of the future will evolve from the present concerns found in society. The present wave of interest in social reconstruction will undoubtedly serve as a major force in shaping future curricula. This interest may take two directions; one relating to the content studied by students and the other relating to improving the quality of living within the school.

The program found in the typical elementary or secondary school gives only cursory attention to the important social problems that are demanding solution. Little time is devoted to the study of problems such as integration, unemployment, poverty, the rebuilding of the inner-city, air pollution, and rapid transit. While some attention may be given to problems of this type within the framework of the traditional subject offerings, there will also need to be an increased emphasis upon the behavioral sciences. Sociology, psychology, and anthropology may compete for time with the more established subjects in the school program.

It seems likely that scholars from the behavioral sciences will play a part in the downward extension of their disciplines. It also seems reasonable to expect that these areas will follow the pattern of emphasizing concept development and the process of inquiry associated with the academic disciplines.

Our society is becoming increasingly organized. Most students, now in school, will come into intimate contact with organized social institutions during the balance of their lives. It is no longer possible for an individual to live in isolation. The school would seem to be an ideal laboratory for studying the activities, interactions, and sentiments of people as they participate in an organized social system. Numerous examples may be found to illustrate concepts such as leadership, influence, power, authority, and norms.

The Learner

The present focus upon the structure of knowledge has undoubtedly had a number of positive effects. There is, however, the danger that our focus upon content will encourage the continuation of the practice of giving only superficial attention to the problems of the learner.

The curriculum changes of the recent past have done little to reduce the number of school dropouts, decrease student alienation, or reduce the frequency with which discipline problems arise. Title I has succeeded in focusing attention upon some of these problems, but by its nature tends to promote the development of supplementary programs which do not become an integral part of the curriculum of the school.

Many of the problems of youth in school are a part of the more general prob-

lems of society. When these problems remain unsolved they tend to perpetuate the conditions that caused them. Recent discussions of the poverty cycle are indicative of an increasing awareness of the nature of the problem.

Problems related to the dropout, the unmotivated, the behavior deviate, and other individuals who do not perform the role of learner in the prescribed way must be solved. This is essential if we are to provide a meaningful education for all children. Our obligation extends beyond opening the doors and providing legal access to the school.

The solution of these problems is necessary if we are to achieve our academic ends. These ends will be more fully achieved when there is a climate that is conducive to learning for all. This climate cannot exist when a high percentage of the students are not actively engaged in pursuing the objectives that have been set forth.

Role of Curriculum Workers

Curriculum workers should play an important role in ensuring that the future changes in the curriculum result in improved quality. This may be accomplished by providing for direction and balance in the curriculum, by assisting in evaluating both new and established programs, and by helping others to effectively implement new programs and practices.

Alterations in the school program may involve changes in goals or in the procedures for accomplishing already established goals. The two types of change should be distinguished because they involve different kinds of decisions. Decisions about the goals of education represent value judgments, while those that relate to procedures involve making assumptions about the nature of the teaching-learning process.

The lack of direction which characterizes recent curriculum change may be avoided if curriculum generalists identify the manner in which the adoption of new programs will affect the goals of the school. The goals of new programs are often implicit rather than explicit. Clarification of these goals makes it possible to make judgments about the desirability of programs.

Changes which relate to the adoption of new procedures frequently fail to state the assumptions that are being made about the nature of the learning process. Specialists in curriculum should abstract the assumptions that are being made. This makes it possible to search for evidence which will support the assumptions. When such evidence is lacking, procedures should be designed to test the validity of the assumptions.

Modern mathematics, team teaching, linguistics, and modular scheduling have often been adopted because it was thought that they would improve education in some vague way. This approach has placed educators in the embarrassing position of having no meaningful way of evaluating new programs. Effective evaluation must be preceded by a clear statement of the objectives. It is commonly accepted that the objectives should be stated in behavioral terms; however, this is seldom

done. The test of the desirability of a new program or practice is the degree to which it contributes to desired alterations in the knowledge, skills, attitudes, or abilities of pupils.

There is a need for new organizational structures for dealing with the rapid rate of change in education. Such structures should be inclusive enough to provide for the cooperative efforts of persons with a variety of training and interests. These structures should make it possible for curriculum specialists, researchers, teachers, and behavioral scientists to carry on meaningful dialogues about the goals of education and the development of strategies appropriate to their accomplishment.

Despite the increase in the rate of innovation since the firing of Sputnik I a decade ago, it remains true that school systems, like other social institutions, tend to remain relatively stable and to resist efforts to impose major changes. Considerable attention has been devoted to the design of new programs in education, but comparatively little attention has been given to the process by which change is brought about. The efforts directed toward the improvement of methods, materials, and curricula are doomed to have little impact upon education as experienced by children in classrooms across the country unless effective means are found for implementing these programs. Curriculum specialists may increase their effectiveness by focusing upon both the content and the process of change. 

The New Elementary School

Edited by
Alexander Frazier

This booklet concentrates upon several areas in elementary education in which radically new ideas are being developed and new research reported. Special consideration is given to new knowledge about young children and how they grow and develop, to patterns of content selection and organization, and to new approaches to teacher education.

Price: \$2.50 Pages: 160

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