

# Involving Graduate Students in Curriculum: The Adams-Morgan Project

**BRUCE B. BURNES \***  
**GORDON E. HERSHBERGER**

**C**URRICULUM leadership requires more than new ideas. It requires an experience of having ideas challenged by and tested in a real-life situation. As curriculum ideas change through exposure to real-life situations, so are the thinking and behavior of the curriculum leader also changed. And in the final analysis, curriculum ideas will only introduce change to the extent that thinking and behavior by the curriculum leader are in tune with the tasks of the actual school situation.

Graduate schools in education bear the primary responsibility for the production of ideas to be used by the prospective curriculum leader. But graduate schools have an equal responsibility to provide opportunities for the student to relate these ideas to the curriculum requirements of the school. If graduate schools in education fail to provide these opportunities, the ideas produced by the prospective curriculum leader of the future will have little practical significance to the needs he is attempting to serve.

A graduate class in principles of curriculum development is a means for providing this opportunity. A class in principles of

curriculum development should assist the students in discovering the relevance of the principles they are learning to actual school situations. It should also adopt methods which develop the abilities needed by a potential curriculum leader. The question then arises as to how such a course can provide the opportunities which permit curriculum principles to be applied in a real-life situation.

An opportunity was provided for six graduate students in principles of curriculum development at the University of Maryland to assume curriculum leadership.<sup>1</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> The Adams-Morgan School Project, in Washington, D.C., requested the professor's assistance in curriculum development. The professor suggested to the school, and to her graduate class, that this was an opportunity that some interested students might consider as a possible class project. Six students volunteered. The professor then invited the administrators of the project to address the class, and later, to contact the six students.

\* Bruce B. Burnes, Assistant Professor, University of Minnesota at Morris; and Gordon E. Hershberger, Graduate Assistant, Department of Administration, Supervision, and Curriculum, University of Maryland, College Park

opportunity was provided by the Adams-Morgan School Project, in Washington, D.C.

## **The Adams-Morgan Project**

The Adams-Morgan School Project is a cooperative effort of the Adams-Morgan Community Council, the Antioch-Putney College, and the Board of Education, Washington, D.C. This project was initiated to serve two purposes. One, to encourage more involvement of parents in the policy decisions of the Adams-Morgan Elementary School. Two, to develop curriculum methods of teaching that were applicable to the inner-city child.

After frequent contacts with the administrators and supervisors of the project, individual visits to the school, and personal conversations with the teachers, the University of Maryland students decided to work in the area of curriculum development. Following consideration of several alternative subject areas, the group of six students chose to work on the social studies curriculum. A number of difficulties appeared as they began to consider the appropriate procedures for developing a curriculum.

### **Difficulties Encountered**

The first problem was that a majority of the group had no previous experience in curriculum development, and had not been involved in leadership roles. The feasibility of doing this project was further complicated by the diverse backgrounds of the individuals in the group. Because the individuals were not acquainted with one another, lines of communication had to be established and interpersonal adjustments made.

Another difficulty encountered was the inability to have a teacher from the Adams-Morgan School participate in the group. Unfortunately, due to difficulties in scheduling and logistics, this could not be arranged. It soon became apparent to the group that its members would have to bridge the gap between what it produced and what the teachers would use.

Further difficulties arose when the

school decided not to follow any precedents established by earlier social studies programs. The school had eliminated its previous social studies program in order to develop something new and different. In addition, the emotional climate of the Adams-Morgan community had established strict guidelines for determining what should or should not be included in the social studies curriculum. The school appeared to be opposed to any social studies program that emphasized the typical, i.e., the curriculum found in white suburbia as opposed to what the school staff considered to be the true story.

### **Curriculum Developed**

In view of these difficulties, the decision was made to use a Social Studies Method of Inquiry as the major organizing principle in the social studies curriculum. Operationally, this method included: formulating an hypothesis, gathering data, analyzing/classifying, evaluating/interpreting, and summarizing (Michaelis, 1963). The group felt that the inquiry method would provide the best means for avoiding many of the difficulties they first encountered.

By using the inquiry method, the group was able to avoid specifying content that touched on the very sensitive issues of Negro history, civil rights, and distinctions between the middle- and the lower-class mores, traditions, and culture. Therefore, the teacher who would be aware of these sensitive issues would have the responsibility and prerogative for selecting the topics in social studies. The teacher would also have the flexibility to select those topics he felt were most relevant to his class.

### **Outcomes**

The end result of the graduate students' efforts was presented to the Adams-Morgan staff. The staff members responded favorably to what was presented. However, the final decision for its use in the classroom was left to the individual teacher. The effects of this proposed social studies curriculum are not known at this time.

However, in applying principles of curriculum development to a real-life situation, the resulting outcomes of greatest significance were not what the graduate students submitted to the administration and teachers of the Adams-Morgan School. The important outcomes were rather the changes that had taken place in the minds of the graduate students as they attempted to find answers to the problems related to the actual development of a social studies curriculum.

Ideas and questions raised in the classroom now took on new meaning when viewed in relationship to a specifically prescribed life situation. Such questions as the following required the graduate students to search for additional insights: What is curriculum? Where does one begin in developing curriculum? Should curriculum development be a process of adapting the ideas of various curriculum scholars to a particular real-life situation? What are other bases for curriculum development? What should be the role of the curriculum director and principal? How do the roles of the various persons differ? These and other questions were not only raised, but answers were sought.

The most significant outcome, however, was the learning that resulted from participation in the group process during each working session held by the graduate students. Although it is crucial that the graduate student understand group process, its component parts are difficult to verbalize and objectify in an experiential setting. Components of the group process such as testing ideas, synthesizing differing concepts, compromising on viewpoints, communicating suggestions, and tolerating differing personal behaviors can be easily defined theoretically, in the typical graduate school classroom. Yet their relatively succinct theoretical definitions are never able to convey adequately the existential meaning they have in the real-life experience. The vital elements of the group process can only acquire real meaning for an individual when they are experienced through actual group interaction.

Each member experienced a sense of accomplishment by being able to develop a part of a social studies curriculum applicable to a specific situation. This was a source of great personal satisfaction and achievement, and would no doubt encourage each participant to be less hesitant when a similar opportunity arose. As individuals, we began to discover what we felt was more the essence of curriculum development. The energy expended, the interpersonal relationships that developed, and the freedom to discuss and implement ideas had brought changes in the thinking and behavior of the participants. These changes were of more significance than the document produced.

The group activity represented a microcosm of a real-life situation. It was a sounding board for ideas when all members' opinions were heard and respected. The end result represented a group effort. Yet, because of this experience, each member of the group will no doubt become, in his own way, a better curriculum leader.

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