

Pressure Group Curriculum

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A PRIMARY reason for much of the activity in curriculum development is the widespread disenchantment with the effectiveness of public education, particularly in urban communities. This discontent has manifested itself in social and political pressures on boards of education and school staffs; that is, much of the change has been a function of pressures of special interest groups rather than the result of research in psychology or in new discoveries in the learning process.

This is not a new phenomenon in public education. Actually, the curricula of the public schools of this country have been largely determined by pressure groups, if one accepts a definition of a pressure group to be a number of persons with a relatively common interest who have combined their forces in order to reach a common goal.

The curricula of the schools in the past 50 years have gone from subject-centered to child-centered and now back to subject-centered, but with present emphasis on structure and process. This cyclic pattern has been marked by a variety of educational techniques and technological changes in the past dozen or so years; by considerable emphasis, real or claimed, on innovation; and by large expenditures of money to produce new materials and to train teachers to use them. Whether the changes in content and methodology that have materialized in the classrooms are in keeping with the effort is questionable.

The only things new in the present situation are the composition of the pressure groups and the magnitude of their influence. It is something less than realistic to expect that public education could operate divorced from pressure groups. Pressure groups are inherent in our kind of government. Indeed, the importance and the necessity of such groups were early recognized by James Madison, who questioned if liberty could exist without them. The successful operation of our form of government was seen by him as the control of the various groups so that no one of these could become dominant.

Similarly, Paul Nitze characterized democracy as "a process of continually balancing and rebalancing liberty and order, authority and independence, rights and obligation." In this context, it is difficult to imagine

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any other process by which curricula, or any aspect of public education, would be determined.

The effect of group pressures is so evident in public education because it is so public; that is, any institution that is publicly supported and controlled will be open to the influence of pressure groups. The pressures are of many kinds and, in keeping with Madison's theory of government, the schools may owe a considerable amount of their success in maintaining a reasonably balanced curriculum to the offsetting effects of various pressure groups.

Whether or not one agrees with Madison's theory is unimportant in the context of the influences of pressure groups on the curriculum. It is important, however, to recognize that our political and economic life is largely determined by the power of organized groups. The proof of the general acceptance of this fact is the large number of groups which exist; indeed, there is an organized group to promote almost every cause one can imagine.

Subject Matter Specialists

Dissatisfaction with the school curriculum was increasingly evident immediately following World War II, with the demand for revision of secondary school mathematics and science curricula. The success of Sputnik in 1957 gave considerable impetus to the movement. The hypothesis of Jerome Bruner that "any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development," and the subsequent apparent success of the early childhood education programs have resulted also in a critical examination of the elementary school curriculum.

It is questionable that any one event such as Sputnik is responsible for all of the curriculum ferment of the past dozen years. Yet it is not questionable that the ferment has been considerable and that it is characterized by a discipline-centered approach in which structure is the key idea. The demand for change in this movement comes from the academicians of several disciplines. The formula for initiating and implementing the proposed change is much the same in all subject matter areas. As John Goodlad¹ has indicated, the patterns are surprisingly similar from project to project: initiative by an individual or a learned society; subsequent preparation and trial of materials; and the institutes to educate teachers in content and methodology.

While Goodlad further indicated that it should not be assumed that all public elementary and secondary schools and all teachers have been affected by this curriculum change, the magnitude of the work done by these interest groups in a relatively short period of time is impressive. For example, Henry S. Dyer,² citing several reports, lists 32 projects in mathematics, 11 in secondary school science, 31 new social studies programs, and 20 new English programs.

The financial support of this rather considerable effort has come mainly from some foundations and from the federal government. While

¹ John I. Goodlad. *School Curriculum Reform in the United States*. New York: The Fund for the Advancement of Education, 1964. p. 10.

² Henry S. Dyer. "The Art of Unwrapping Curriculum Packages." *NASSP Bulletin* 52(328): 146, May 1968.

the qualitative effect, not unlike the quantitative impact already mentioned, should not be overestimated at this point, a great change has taken place on a national scale. It must be emphasized, however, that there is no national pattern; rather, the acceptance of the proposed changes varies greatly, both from subject to subject and from school to school.

Minority Groups

Some of the most prominent pressure groups in the past few years are those primarily interested in the Negro. In large urban areas there are usually several such groups, including high school and university students. One of their main interests has been the curriculum. The demands of these groups include a more balanced treatment of the contributions of Negroes to our society, the introduction of courses such as African history and Swahili, and a total school program which provides a better understanding of Negro culture.

The demands of the several groups have been manifested in various ways from demonstrations in the schools to scholarly presentations to a board of education. Fortunately, the void which has existed too long in published materials for school use is now recognized, and many excellent materials are becoming available. Also, there is increasing evidence that once the mutual distrust is at least partially dissolved, many members of these groups, including high school students, are most anxious to help the schools provide the programs that are long overdue.

Disadvantaged Pupils

Another pressure of considerable magnitude is not evidenced by discrete, organized groups, but rather by the large increase in many cities of the number of educationally disadvantaged and culturally different pupils. The schools have lacked the staffs, materials, and financial resources necessary to deal adequately with the educational problems presented by these pupils. As a result, drastic reorganization of the curriculum is demanded. One of the earliest programs, and perhaps the most successful, is Head Start (1965) based on findings in the research of Deutsch, Bloom, and others.

The growing problem of the disadvantaged pupil in large cities became the concern of the federal government; consequently, educational programs have been supported to a larger extent in recent years than ever before. For example, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 provided funds to support, among other things, part-time related work experience for pupils. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 helped support several types of programs for the disadvantaged. Thus, by expanding materially financial support to education as a part of the "War on Poverty" and the "Great Society," the federal government exerted considerable influence to modify the curriculum for some pupils.

Decentralization

Decentralization is a pressure which is still quite poorly defined and which as yet has had little effect on curriculum. The increasingly loud demand that school system administration and control in large cities be

decentralized is now directed primarily at administrative matters, such as teacher assignment, but the ultimate test of any administrative organization must be the quality of the instructional program.

The idea of decentralization is sometimes being regarded as the panacea to solve the problems of the large city. It is claimed that such reorganization will improve the program for the disadvantaged in one city, will help solve the issue of racial balance in another, will improve the program for the academically able in still another, and will lower costs and improve salaries in yet another.

It is generally accepted that one solution to the problem of government lies in a decentralization of those governmental functions which bear most directly on the lives of the people. The caution which should be considered is not related to the concept of decentralization, but rather to the claim that it is a sure solution to complex problems. It is to be hoped that the proponents of decentralization will have an opportunity to demonstrate that better curriculum can indeed be defined, developed, and implemented more rapidly with the available resources before school systems are forced too rapidly to change from their present organization, whatever it may be.

The point of all of this is that pressure groups are a natural phenomenon of our society. The curriculum is not solely the result of either board action or administrative decision. It is rather the function of pressure of many groups or forces, a few of which have been listed here to illustrate the diversity of those now helping to determine the curriculum.

It is the job of persons responsible for curriculum development and implementation to recognize the importance of these several groups and to find ways of dealing with them to evolve the best curriculum. If these persons are to meet this responsibility now, it is of paramount importance to recognize the demand of the many groups to have a part in the design of that aspect of the program of the schools which affects them. No aspect of the program has greater impact than the curriculum. □

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