

# Educational Goals in a Pluralistic Society

**Stuart C. Rankin**

**E**ACH decade another national group produces a set of goals for American education. The statements usually are very similar. They highlight the importance of learning to think, learning to learn, learning to adjust, learning to communicate, and learning to live in a democratic society.

The members of the ASCD Commission on Goals in American Education question whether another such statement will be useful. It is certain that such statements of common goals have legitimized activities by many of us in our work. It is unlikely that such goal statements have triggered new action on the part of anyone. It is probable that widely divergent, and indeed conflicting, programs have been justified on the basis of those goal statements; such an occurrence is possible because we rarely make explicit the connections between general common goals and specific classroom activities.

A second and more important reason for the Commission's hesitancy to produce another statement of common goals is that the very idea of common goals is partly in conflict with a basic belief of an open democratic society—that diversity must not only be tolerated, it must be cherished and nourished.

To allow for some variety within a general framework is not what we mean by prizing diversity. I must value your uniqueness, your difference, not only for your sake but for my sake. I am the richer because you are different. I must treasure and nourish and salute and protect your singularity, your uniqueness, your solitude.

Among other things, this concept means that the student must be the actor. Not be acted upon. He chooses his own goals. I do not set them for him. He is the player, I am the coach. He makes choices, I try to provide options.

## **To Provide Options**

But different individuals and different groups may have different goals in education. And that is right. A white teacher may decide that one of his goals for education is the elimination of white racism, both

personal and institutional. A black teacher may set an educational goal of building an attitude among black children and youth that they indeed can gain control of their own destiny. Although these two goals are clearly not in conflict, they may well have different priorities for different people, and those differences may well be right for each of them.

To argue that individuals and groups should have their own unique goals is not to argue against common goals for an open democratic society. Having unique goals is indeed itself a common goal. The point is that the individual goals are as important as the common goals. Allegiance to uniqueness and diversity does not imply a conflict with allegiance to common purpose. It does imply a pluralistic society rather than a melting pot where the major culture assimilates minor ones.

Curriculum development has traditionally followed the pattern of (a) goal-setting, including the establishment of specific objectives; (b) selection and organization of learning activities; and (c) evaluation to determine progress toward objectives. Perhaps we need to consider again a step which should precede goal-setting, namely, a reexamination of basic beliefs. Today's counter-cultures are helping us look behind common goals to humaneness, uniqueness, equality of opportunity, liberty, free choice, and the importance of diversity.

As we examine our individual beliefs and goals, we need to use them as criteria for evaluating what we are doing in schools. If my goal is to teach children to think or to read or to love or to prize diversity, I should be able to examine my own work in my own job to see if the learning activities that I support do, indeed, foster the achievement of those goals. I should examine my assessment and evaluation plans to see if I am measuring achievement in those areas.

Goals Commission members have written many of the papers in this issue. We have chosen not to reexamine or postulate or synthesize goals for American education at this time. We do believe that education is purposive, that goal-setting is a central fiber in the fabric of curriculum. We do want to help the nation engage in examining beliefs, formulating goals, and preparing agendas for education.

The purpose of this issue is to engage you in deliberation and dialogue about beliefs and goals in education. You will find papers emphasizing the preliminary need for survival, a concern for individuality, a plea for humaneness, recommendations for variety in the alternatives we provide for students and the community, and a challenge to prize the diversity of each individual and each group.

It may be that we need to work hard to stop setting goals for others. Being different is great. It poses problems as different people encounter each other. We should welcome those problems.

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