

# Beyond Sputnik

**Glenys G. Unruh**

**W**HETHER the Sputnik-inspired "curriculum reform movement" of the sixties was either a reform or a movement has been questioned, but that curriculum developers learned much because of it is indisputable.

Although enthusiastically proclaimed as a reform or a revolution at the height of the activity, the sixties may more properly be characterized as a decade of curriculum writing and experimentation.

Macdonald<sup>1</sup> has pointed out that the "curriculum reform movement" was in no real sense a movement because its separate parts were never really related or coordinated; that it was a historical accident, a combination of Sputnik, McCarthyism, interested professors, federal money, and the ambitions of commercial publishers.

The new curricula and new materials that were developed over the decade with the expenditure of millions of dollars and involvement of hundreds of teachers in institutes have not brought about a sweeping nationwide reformation in the schools. Other

critical ingredients were needed as well as new instructional approaches, materials, units, and courses.

A glance back over a half century of curriculum development in America reminds us that there has been a succession of single-principle solutions to curriculum problems. At times the traditional orientation of the academic subjects has prevailed; at other times the child-centered approach, and similar either/or approaches.

In the early fifties, construction rather than curriculum was uppermost in the minds of most school administrators. The post-war population boom had produced a 33 percent increase in students, and the task of recruiting staff and managing building programs diverted the attention of educators away from a comprehensive approach to curriculum change. Some sporadic efforts were made during the fifties to improve education for the gifted, to increase international understanding, to expand the use of audio-visual materials, and to improve school guidance programs. Yet these efforts were not enough.

Distant rumblings of dissatisfaction with the quality of education in the public schools of America began to be heard in the early 1950's and erupted into a storm after Sputnik orbited the earth in 1957. Inspired

<sup>1</sup> J. D. Macdonald. "Curriculum Development in Relation to Social and Intellectual Systems." In: Robert M. McClure, editor. *The Curriculum: Retrospect and Prospect*. 70th Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part I. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971. p. 97.

by fears for national defense, the federal government and private foundations poured funds into curriculum projects. From initial efforts in mathematics and science, the revision efforts spread into other subject fields. Greatest effects were found in the schools of the resource-rich suburban communities, where ambitious parents and teachers found the new curriculum developments to be helpful in assisting college-bound youngsters on their way toward college.

Again, the single-principle basis for curriculum development prevailed. The work of Bruner and others emphasized the "structure of the disciplines" as a basis for curriculum design. Attention was called to the general usefulness of structure within a discipline as an organizing principle, but a comprehensive curriculum development theory was not set forth.

Nevertheless, there were significant gains. The decade of concentrated attention to curriculum development was the beginning of an age of accountability for curriculum and instruction.

## **Achievements**

An important contribution of the era to curriculum development was the wider collaboration of scholars and teachers in the creation of curriculum guides and materials which interrupted an earlier cycle of mediocrity in curriculum development. Curriculum committees in local school systems had been writing numerous curriculum guides which were for the most part outlines of content and activities lifted from several textbooks. The textbook publishers in turn had customarily collected curriculum guides and published more textbooks, setting up a cycle of limited content and ideas. Collaboration of specialists and teachers in the sixties has led to wider involvement of many groups in curriculum making in the seventies.

The stress on "inquiry" in the new curriculum developments has continued to have a lasting effect on curriculum and instruction. Teachers today feel uncomfortable if they find themselves merely "covering" a body of factual information in their instruc-

tional approaches and making no provision for problem formulation and introduction of higher thought processes. The curriculum projects, although widely diverse in subject matter, methods, and materials, share a common commitment to teaching students how to learn, encouraging them to acquire skills and insights as well as information, leading them to discover ideas and arrive at general principles and concepts. Students are not expected to rediscover all knowledge but to learn how to utilize knowledge and facts for finding connections between ideas and for developing solutions to problems.

Another major contribution of the curriculum development decade was the emphasis on variety and alternatives in materials and procedures. A rich array of materials and media began to be available to curriculum developers. Pamphlets, source books, readings, and original documents began to compete with traditional textbooks. Multimedia kits, audio-visual resources, simulations, models, and nonverbal games became widely known. In the science laboratories, students approached unknowns through original experimentation rather than being confined to repetitive laboratory exercises, although both had a rightful place in maintaining the balance between the known and the unknown. Technological equipment invaded the libraries and caused a welcome flurry in the role of the librarian.

In all, the combined effects of wider involvement in curriculum making, emphasis on inquiry and thought processes, fresh content, and wide variety in curriculum materials and resources have produced lasting gains. However, shortcomings must also be noted.

## **Omissions**

The new curriculum developments emerged from the separate disciplines; therefore, the division of knowledge and skills into the various subjects was maintained and the separate fields of reading, mathematics, social studies, science, music, and art emphasized the known fundamentals, with little attention to the more integrative qualities of

knowledge, skills, appreciation, and understandings that come from insights triggered by frequent, although not exclusively, inter-related and interdisciplinary approaches to learning.

Students, during the curriculum development decade, seemed to be the participants who were least consulted in curriculum planning, and they reacted in many cases with either extreme apathy or extreme activism. In the inner city, a barren environment and human indifference had reduced schools to barely endurable custodial institutions. In the suburbs, more affluent students began to resent the adult pressures toward college and social conformity which seemed to be blighting their growing-up years.

Preoccupation of the curriculum developers with curriculum structure and new teaching styles left them somewhat unprepared for the shock of the "crisis" writings near the close of the decade that suddenly attracted wide audiences not previously accustomed to reading about schools. Social issues gained center stage in the educational community, and equality of educational opportunity, relevance, accountability, and school-community responsibility became major concerns.

Seemingly, American education had failed to respond to changing social needs, and its educational system was accused of maintaining a group at the bottom. Bruner, a key figure of the curriculum development efforts, asked how a society could be so enormously wealthy, yet so callously destructive. While professing idealism, he said, America was maintaining urban ghettos, poverty, and racism.<sup>2</sup>

Possibly also due to the preoccupation of the curriculum developers with concepts, key ideas, and lofty goals, was the omission of the task of specification of objectives based on local needs and utilized to improve the process of evaluation as feedback for modification. It was not until after the peak

of the curriculum revision era that attention was directed toward the potential power of combining goals, needs, objectives, alternative procedures, and materials, with evaluative processes.

A continuing problem is the need to develop comprehensive school improvement programs rather than introducing bits and pieces of "new" curriculum with too little attention to the support systems of organizational arrangements, time schedules, and imaginative use of human and material resources.

### Lessons Available

Collaborative efforts of scholars and teachers in the sixties were useful and productive and can lead to much wider interpretation and involvement. Urgently needed educational improvements can become widespread when joint ventures of researchers, developers, students, and teachers are directed toward solving daily problems in the schools and toward increasing individual and group capacity to solve curriculum development and staff development problems. Through cooperative efforts, schools can more closely meet the needs of individuals, local communities, and society at large and at the same time work out new and much-needed patterns of cooperation, tolerance, and mutual respect among the pluralistic members of our society. Openness, individuality, participation, trust, and mutually supported group efforts are needed.

The need for process education is an important lesson that emerged from the new curriculum developments of the sixties. In a process approach, the student himself is more important than the subject content. He becomes conscious of ways of gathering, assessing, and acting upon information.

The methods, skills, and purposes of processes cut across subject disciplines and are applicable to changing knowledge and changing conditions which the student must face throughout his life. Knowing a given content area continues to be of importance in the process approach; but as content changes, the student is able to utilize

<sup>2</sup> Jerome S. Bruner. "The Process of Education Reconsidered." In: Robert R. Leeper, editor. *Dare To Care/Dare To Act*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1971. pp. 25-26.

new information in a constantly altering succession of problems, conditions, and situations. Process approaches emphasize motivational, affective, cognitive, interpersonal, and socially interactive skills. If process education can be applied effectively, students can develop those skills which will help individuals and society to be healthy, productive, and adaptable.

That alternatives in education are needed was also revealed following the curriculum "reform" decade. Overreliance on the new curricula as panaceas for the ills of education was illustrated by their low impact anywhere other than suburbia. Not only alternative types of curriculum content, methods, and material are needed, but many other alternatives in education are possible and desirable. More and more illustrations of alternatives are being reported and are commanding attention to new options and alternate routes to common objectives. Still more constraints can be removed regarding

where learning shall take place, what time of day, what age of person, what length of course, what requirements for graduation, what topics to study, whose concerns are to be considered.

Perhaps the greatest lesson learned from the curriculum reform efforts of the sixties is the need for increased capacity for renewal and responsiveness in curriculum development. Responsiveness and constant renewal will require organization and interaction of referent groups concerned with curriculum development, and integration of the many elements and sources of curriculum. A comprehensive approach to curriculum development based on value decisions, responsiveness to human needs, and feedback from processes utilized in reaching specific objectives can provide the means to attain the broad goals of American democracy.

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## **Educational Leadership Announces Themes for 1973-74**

Manuscripts relevant to the proposed themes for the 1973-74 issues of *Educational Leadership* are now being solicited from the readers by the editor.

Tentative topics, and deadlines for receipt of manuscripts for examination, are the following:

**October:** "Taboos in Education: New Realities" (June 1, 1973)

**November:** "Women and Education" (June 1)

**December:** "Middle School in the Making?" (July 1)

**January:** "Competency-Based Education: For Whom?" (August 1)

**February:** "Technology: Use and Abuse?" (September 1)

**March:** "Helping Professionals To Grow" (October 1)

**April:** "Curriculum for Economic & Ethnic Diversity" (November 1)

**May:** "Rights, Responsibilities, and Curriculum" (December 1)

Length of manuscripts should be approximately 1400 words (about five pages), typed double-spaced. General style should conform to that of the journal. Photographs and other illustrative materials are requested.

Manuscripts should be submitted in duplicate and must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope for return of unused manuscripts. Decisions on materials will be made as promptly as possible.

Materials should be addressed to: Robert R. Leeper, Editor, *Educational Leadership*, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

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