

Issues in Humanities Education

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THE late 1950's and the 1960's gave witness to the growth of an entirely new curricular area, humanities education. The much heralded advance of science education was countered by the persistent rise of humanities education, first in secondary schools, then in elementary schools. Later, colleges and universities reworked curricula to include interdisciplinary studies and revamped existing humanities programs.

Illustrative of the growth was the birth of many organizations directly concerned with humanities education; most notably, the National Endowment for the Humanities was established, with the National Humanities Faculty as its official educational arm. Others too were born during this era, such as the National Association for Humanities Education with its state constituencies, Centers for Humanities Education. Existing organizations took up the cause of humanities education: the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development devoted monographs and issues of *Educational Leadership* to the emerging area of study; the National Council of Teachers of English and others followed the lead of ASCD by giving recognition to the new field.

As the new area of humanities education was developed, it was marked by the growth pains that often accompany new endeavors. Further, if humanities education, as the passage of time has shown, is to assert

itself as a viable subject matter field, it must resolve issues which have and will continue to undercut its effectiveness. In need of attention are five issues: (a) the nebulousness of humanities education makes it difficult, if not impossible, to define boundaries; (b) there appear to be few standard objectives for the teaching of the humanities; (c) there appear to be few standard expectations in the preparation of humanities teachers; (d) little direction, at present, is given by state education agencies in the preparation of humanities teachers or in recognizing humanities education as a distinct subject matter field;¹ and (e) the financial squeeze now being felt in schools may result in relegation of humanities education to the "frill" category.

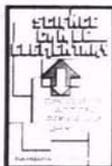
These Are the Concerns

● A very real danger threatens the existence of humanities education in that it may become dissipated through an absence of definition. The humanities consist of a traditional body of study: literature, art, history, philosophy, and sometimes the per-

¹ There are exceptions: New York, Ohio, Missouri, and Florida come to mind. Most states, however, offer consultant assistance, but nothing of a long-term commitment.

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forming arts. The traditional definition has been expanded to include not only cognitive studies but also the more elusive studies in the aesthetic and affective domains. The range between the humanities as a scholarly study and "humanized education" is great, with many programs being a balance of the two extremes. Yet the varying interpretations of the content and the problem of how to teach the humanities have befogged rather than delineated the field, so much so that it would take another Theseus to trace its labyrinthine ways. Programs bearing the label "humanities education" now differ so widely in priorities, aims, and teaching practices that little in common can be ascribed to humanities education.

● The rationale for humanities education varies from program to program, probably the result of the varying definitions of humanities education. Many teachers view the humanities as a means of discovering our cultural heritage. For those teachers, the way to that collective identity is eminently

clear: through a thorough, cognitively-based study of man's great achievements.

There are also teachers who believe a student's "humanity" is expanded through a sensory-rich environment, hence aesthetic education which explores the various realms of artistic beauty, the development of taste, and the development of personal aesthetic criteria.

Finally, there are teachers who say that without finding "where the student is at," no teacher-designed curriculum makes sense. A curriculum in this instance is drawn partly from student interest and from open-ended teacher-designed units; that is, decision-making, role-playing, sensitizing techniques. Among and beyond these approaches are others—language-based humanities education, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary studies, Cultural Epoch and Great Themes approaches. Confusion results when each program puts forth its rationale for the teaching of the humanities as *the* rationale.

● The fact that humanities education

is a nebulous field, going in many directions at the same time, indeed makes it difficult to fix qualifications for its teachers. If humanities education is viewed as art, literature, history, and philosophy, what is to be done with those who teach affective education but also claim to be humanities teachers? What of those who teach aesthetic education—are they to be considered simply art teachers with an extended area of interest, or are they too humanities educators?

Unless those who hire teachers for humanities programs are familiar with the specifics that various humanities teacher preparation programs offer, there can be no assurance as to what competencies the hired teacher possesses, or if they are appropriate for the particular program being offered. Unlike English, history, or even music, humanities education lacks the coherence and stability of other fields in the preparation of its teachers.

● Because humanities education has only recently emerged as a course of study in the public schools, there has been little effort on the part of state certifying agencies to list succinctly the requirements for those who teach the humanities and the expected content of such offerings. And how could it be otherwise? While most humanities teachers speak of their field as being ineluctable, others view it as not being as permanent as other subject fields. For many, humanities education has simply not been on the educational scene long enough in a uniform manner to be so considered. This fact accounts for the assistance offered by most state agencies: curriculum consulting and dissemination of humanities education

materials, the latter more in the vein of public relations rather than with the consistent intent of defining the field.

● Possibly the biggest threat to humanities education in the next few years will be the ease with which it can be eliminated in the continuing educational financial squeeze. The cost of education is increasing at a staggering rate, the burden of which is being borne by the property owners. In most average communities, the battle lines between what is deemed "acceptable education" and "unacceptable education" have been drawn. Humanities programs are often very visible because they are designed as collateral rather than core educational experiences; as a result they get the financial ax because they are seen as extraneous. Humanities education must justify its existence as being germane to education—as being as central to the student's growth as English, the sciences, or gym—or risk being transported to the limbo reserved for flash-in-the-pan innovations.

When humanities educators accept some boundaries to their field; when there emerges some core of skills associated with humanities education, whether they be cognitive or affective; when universities offer a commonality in the preparation of humanities teachers; when state agencies act in consort with humanities teachers; and when humanities education can justify its existence, then it can assume a longevity now accorded to its cousin subject matter fields. But these issues cannot be dodged; they must be faced squarely and presently to ensure the acceptance of humanities education as a viable teaching field. □

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James A. Phillips, Jr., editor

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