

... On the curriculum: ... there is no setting before the students of economic or social or political facts and of their situation within these facts, no attempt made to clarify or even slightly to relieve the situation between the white and Negro races, far less to explain the sources, no attempt to clarify psychological situations in the individual, in his family, or in his world, no attempts to get beneath and to revise these ethical and social pressures and beliefs in which even a young child is trapped, no attempt, beyond the most nominal, to interest a child in using or in discovering his senses and judgment, no attempt to counteract the paralytic quality inherent in authority, no attempt beyond the most nominal and stifling to awaken, to protect, or to guide the sense of investigation, the sense of joy, the sense of beauty, no attempt to clarify spoken and written words whose power of deceit even at the simplest is vertiginous, no attempt, or very little, and ill taught, to teach even the earliest techniques of improvement in occupation, nor to teach a child in terms of his environment, no attempt, beyond the most suffocated, to awaken a student either to religion or to irreligion, no attempt to develop in him either skepticism or faith, nor wonder, nor mental honesty nor mental courage, nor any understanding of our delicateness in the emotions and in any of the uses and pleasures of the body save the athletic; no attempt either to relieve him of fear of poison in sex or to release in him a free beginning of pleasure in it, nor to open within him the illimitable potentials of grief, of danger, and of goodness in sex and in sexual love, nor to give him the beginning at very least of knowledge, and of an attitude, whereby he may hope to guard and increase himself and those whom he touches, no indication of the damages which society, money, law, fear, and quick belief have set upon these matters and upon all things in human life, nor of their causes, nor of the alternative ignorances and possibilities of ruin or of joy, no fear of doubtlessness, no fear of the illusions of knowledge, no fear of compromise. . . . —James Agee.¹

¹ James Agee and Walker Evans. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939. pp. 265-66.



ALTHOUGH James Agee was describing the curriculum of a rural Alabama school in 1936, his observations are still appropriate for the curriculum in many schools in 1973. He points out the conflict between the old educational taboos and the contemporary social realities, a conflict that is more serious today because the gap between the curriculum and the world outside the school is wider than ever. The taboos of the school usually reflect the taboos of an earlier society. Problems arise when the taboos of the past become barriers to education for the present and the future.

Love, Sex, and the Stages of Life

For example, sexuality is one of the established curricular taboos, and certainly it was a real social taboo until very recently. Earlier in this century both men and women wore baggy swimming suits that covered most of the body. Pornographic films were confined to stag affairs. Pregnant women were rarely seen in public and, of course, were not allowed to teach in the schools.

But 1973 is a vintage year for sexuality in a world of rapidly changing values. *Playgirl* sallied out to join *Playboy* on every newsstand; calendars with male nudes in twelve poses appeared, indicating that sexism in sex is on the decline; "topless" and sometimes

TABOOS: REALITIES

RELIGION
DEATH

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"bottomless" ladies serve lunch in some restaurants; massage parlors burgeon; and on nationwide TV a visitor is invited to "hump the hostess."² *Deep Throat*, a film that makes the stag movies of a few years ago seem as mild as *Little Women*, grosses millions of dollars from well mixed audiences. While the curriculum still wears the baggy swimming suit, network television offers children and parents "marital infidelity, coupling without marriage, sexual deviation, impotency, abortion, vasectomy, prostitution, and free love."³ These occur during prime time. Later in the evening parents can watch more sophisticated programming.

Meanwhile, back at the curriculum, sexuality and sex education remain taboo in many communities. How do youth learn the realities of sex? A 1971 survey indicates that most teenage girls who have intercourse do not use contraceptives. Girls 15 to 19 "often gave as their reason their belief that conception could not occur because sex was too infrequent. . . ."⁴ Recently the director of the Indiana University Sex Institute predicted that "the percentage of women engaging in premarital sex would rise to 90 percent and

level off as happened in the Scandinavian countries."⁵

Unless the curriculum can be freed from the old taboos, many in our society will remain woefully ignorant of love and sex, birth and birth control, pregnancy and maternity, homosexuality, adolescence, middle age, old age, senility, and death. *The Manchester Guardian* reports that "death has replaced sex as the great taboo subject of our society."⁶

Violence and Death

Violence and death are realities that are seldom treated in the classroom because they have been considered too unpleasant for children. "By age 14 a child has witnessed the violent assault on or destruction of 18,000 human beings on television."⁷ How many of these are real and how many fiction? A high school graduate in the class of 1973 may have seen television's first live murder coverage when he was in the second grade, thanks to Jack Ruby. He probably saw news replays of the deaths of John Kennedy,

⁵ Paul Gebhard, from a lecture quoted in the *Courier-Tribune*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 26, 1973, p. A4.

⁶ Gillian Tindall. "Death as a Taboo Subject." *The Manchester Guardian*. Reprinted in the *Courier-Tribune*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 21, 1973.

⁷ David Burmester. "The Language of Deceit." *Media and Methods*, May 1973, p. 22.

² "Sex on the Airways: Congress Is Aroused." *Saturday Review of the Arts* 1 (4): 70; April 7, 1973.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ June Brody. *New York Times*, March 1, 1973. Quoted in: *Council-Grams* 34 (3): 37; May 1973.

Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. He may have gotten a taste of college life (and death) at Kent State and Southern University. He witnessed the 1972 Olympics in living (and dying) color.

He saw more than a decade of an undeclared war followed by a declared peace that did not end the violence in Southeast Asia. He lives in a society today where American parents batter, neglect, and kill their children. Estimates for 1973 are that there will be a million and a half cases of child abuse resulting in 50,000 deaths and 300,000 permanently injured children.⁸ How does today's curriculum help children to live with the reality of violence and death? Will they grow up to be violent parents tomorrow? Can we afford to treat these matters as taboo because they are not "nice"?

Immorality in Business, Education, and Government

Does the curriculum prepare adults in our democratic society to cope with the reality of secrecy and dishonesty in government and politics, in advertising and business, and in schools and education? Are these the hidden taboos in today's hidden curriculum? Secrecy and dishonesty in government did not start with Watergate. "We had become somewhat inured to breaking the law," Magruder said. . . .⁹ LBJ had Bobby Baker; JFK had the Bay of Pigs; Ike had Sherman Adams. Headline, December 5, 1957: WILL EISENHOWER RESIGN?¹⁰ (There were also major scandals during the administrations of Grant, Cleveland, Wilson, Harding, F. Roosevelt, and Truman.)

The Pentagon had its papers and its huge cost overruns. Detroit had unsafe cars, unsafe school buses, and falsified reports on emission systems. The schools had dishonesty in performance contracting and falsified

⁸ "Child-Beating Worse Than Watergate." *Herald-Telephone*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 26, 1973. p. 10.

⁹ Jeb Magruder, from his testimony before the Ervin Committee. *Herald-Telephone*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 16, 1973. p. 8.

¹⁰ Quoted in the *Courier-Tribune*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 14, 1973. p. 10.

records of athletes' grades. People learned that the difference between athletics and elections is that if the coaches are caught tampering with athletics, they have to forfeit the games. Where in the curriculum is the reality of secrecy, dishonesty, and immorality in contemporary life?

The Quality of Life

Two black girls, ages 12 and 14, were sterilized without their consent in Montgomery, Alabama, on June 13, 1973. Their mother said that she thought they were going to get "some shots."¹¹ Where in the curriculum are the realities of racism and sexism? of poverty and wealth? of power and powerlessness? of security and insecurity? Where, other than through Archie Bunker, can children learn about the lack of toleration for diversity in this country?

How will they be able to understand the growing resentment against dissatisfying and meaningless jobs in a technological society? How does the curriculum aid in the search for alternative styles of life and living? How does the rest of this small world view the American way of life? Where in our curriculum do we study ourselves as others see us?

By age 14, a child has seen 22,000 hours of television including 350,000 commercials.¹² How does the curriculum help him to understand and analyze the ubiquitous media in his environment? How can he become an intelligent consumer and a wise conserver of the world's limited supplies? Where can he discover the effects of interstate highways on the quality and direction of life? Is the quality of life also a hidden taboo in education?

The Future

The future is both the most critical educational taboo and the ultimate social reality. In earlier societies the future was the realm of religion. The task of the schools was the

¹¹ "Shots' Turn Into Nightmare for Kids." *Courier-Tribune*, Bloomington, Indiana, June 27, 1973. p. 8.

¹² Burmester, *loc. cit.*

transmission of the past to the children of the present. But in one generation the future moved from the metaphysical to the physical. Man found the power to determine his future absolutely—he can destroy himself and life on the earth as we know it. And he has a growing number of alternative ways to do so, thanks to science, industry, and technology.

A society with alternative modes of self-destruction cannot leave its future to chance. A democratic society cannot put its future in the hands of the elected or the powerful, for the future is the responsibility of every man.

The future of mankind must become the central concern of the curriculum. Education must help children to learn to control their futures; to plan, design, and select from among various alternative futures.

With this issue *Educational Leadership* opens a dialogue on the taboos of education and the realities in our lives today. Hopefully this dialogue may contain the seeds of curricular reform and self-renewal.

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Mary-Margaret Scobey (left), chairman of the ASCD Publications Committee, accepted, on behalf of Robert R. Leeper, editor of *Educational Leadership*, three awards citing the magazine for Excellence in Educational Journalism.

The ASCD journal received recognition in three categories for nonprofit magazines: (a) *One-Theme Issue*, for the December 1972 issue, "Education for Career Development"; (b) *Feature Article*, for "The Multi-Recognitions of China," by Seymour Fersh (February 1972); and (c) *Cover Design*, for the October 1972 design by artist Bill Strunk on "Beyond Confrontation."

The awards were presented by Barbara Krohn, president of the Educational Press Association of America, at the 1973 EdPress Awards Luncheon in Portland, Oregon, last June.

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