

# Curriculum Balance for the Individual Learner: A Continuing Need

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*Balance for the individual learner, these writers hold, is extremely difficult to achieve. Yet in a day in which we make great pretense of individualization in instruction, we owe it to ourselves and the pupils we serve to work toward better achievement of this goal.*

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**B**ALANCE in the curriculum means many things to many people. To some persons, achieving balance in the curriculum means balancing selected curriculum values; to other persons, gaining equilibrium among the subjects offered at a given educational level; to others, selecting content evenhandedly for sequential development; to others, using content in one learning area to reinforce content in another area; to others, relating appropriately the offerings in the humanities and the offerings in the sciences; to others, balancing the roles of curriculum workers; to others, equalizing individual learning with group learning; and to still others, interrelating cognitive, affective, and psychomotor experiences. This miscellany of meanings does not, of course, exhaust the possibilities. Naturally, most of the meanings have to do with subject matter and ways of facilitating the learning of subject matter.

Nearly a decade-and-a-half ago, however, the 1961 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development offered the opinion that "balance for the indi-

vidual learner" was at least as important as other versions of balance. Paul Halverson, the yearbook editor, spoke of balance for the individual learner in terms of "the responsibility of an educational institution to take into account the needs of the individual which are more personal and private and do not have as clear a relationship to the social demands upon the institution as might be thought."<sup>1</sup> The point of view about balance to be taken in this article is that balance for the individual learner is most significant, though it is extremely difficult to achieve.

Since 1961, there has been a decline in the incidence with which curriculum balance in all its aspects has been discussed in educational literature. Data from ERIC show that between June 1957 and June 1961 seven articles specifically concerning balance were listed by ERIC, whereas between June 1971 and June 1974 two articles concerning balance were listed. Further checking of *Education Index* confirms the thought that curriculum balance has never been a very

<sup>1</sup> Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *Balance in the Curriculum*. 1961 Yearbook. Washington, D.C.: The Association, 1961. p. 7.

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Careful planning with individual learners, who should be helped to choose what they find appealing among profitable options available to them, is necessary in a balanced curriculum.

popular topic in the periodical literature of education. Nevertheless, it has been discussed freely in one yearbook, a number of textbooks for use in undergraduate and graduate curriculum courses, and a few miscellaneous books and pamphlets concerning the curriculum of schools. Among the relatively recent books in which discussions of curriculum balance appear most prominently are the following:

Ronald C. Doll. *Curriculum Improvement: Decision-Making and Process*. Second and Third editions. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1970 and 1974.

Glen Hass, Joseph Bondi, and Jon Wiles. *Curriculum Planning: A New Approach*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1974. See also the predecessor to this book, *Readings in Curriculum*, 1970. Each volume contains Kimball Wiles's article "Seeking Balance in the Curriculum."

Ross L. Neagley and N. Dean Evans. *Handbook for Effective Curriculum Development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967.

Albert H. Shuster and Milton E. Ploghoft. *The Emerging Elementary Curriculum*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., Inc., 1970.

J. Lloyd Trump and Delmas F. Miller.

*Secondary School Curriculum Improvement: Challenges, Humanism, Accountability*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1973.

Betty A. Wright, Louie T. Camp, William K. Stosberg, and Babette L. Fleming. *Elementary School Curriculum: Better Teaching Now*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971.

The book about school curriculum that contains more than a paragraph or two concerning curriculum balance is rare. From this fact and related facts, it appears that curriculum theorists and practitioners tend to evade the difficult issue of balance. They neglect the "rifle approach," a zeroing in to achieve accuracy of curriculum prescription, in favor of a "shotgun approach," in which more and more unclassified, miscellaneous experiences become available to learners. In many ways, adopting and creating educational experiences for large numbers of learners is easier and more convenient than helping individual learners with their specific learning problems. Monitoring individual pupils' development, prescribing, treating, and monitoring again are not only difficult; they offend many practitioners who want to make teaching less complicated than it actually is; and they are very expensive of time and money.

Nevertheless, evidence continues to ac-

cumulate that careful monitoring, prescribing, and treating are the only real means of making a significant difference in the development of human beings. Altered roles for teachers are being seen in these terms, as Silberman makes clear in his *Crisis in the Classroom*. Because the needs of learners are individual, our most constructive educational work is personalized within the life space of the individual pupil.

### What Is Our Record?

How long would we respect garages and hospitals for their ability to improve balance if their record in achieving it were poor? For a few dollars, we can have the tires on our cars balanced; for a few more dollars, the alignment of the "front end" checked. Temporarily, our worries about balance, automotive version, are over. Eventually we return our cars to garages for rebalancing, again with probable satisfaction.

We are less pleased with the success of hospitals in achieving homeostasis in the individual patient's physical condition. But hospitals work hard at it. Like the best garages, they monitor, diagnose, treat, and monitor again. In dealing with individual patients, they test, observe, interview, consult, and retest in quest of homeostasis, which is present today, but not necessarily tomorrow, next week, or next month. The cost of this kind of attention to individuals is alarming, but the percentage of eventual cures is high enough to make people in civilized countries proud of their medical procedures, facilities, and personnel.

In the schools, human and material resources for helping individual children achieve the educational version of balance are fewer. The hierarchy of practitioners who can use material resources and strategies (like tests, inventories, planned observation, and interviews) in sophisticated ways is actually unskilled in using them intensively with individuals. Instruments for use in educational diagnosis and evaluation are generally cruder than those used in medicine and automobile mechanics, and balance as seen in educational practice is more com-

plicated than it is in either of the other two fields.

What does curriculum balance for the individual learner consist of, and what makes it so difficult to achieve? A balanced educational program for the individual would meet the educational needs of that individual in his or her current development state. These needs are of two general kinds: needs which the individual and his or her mentors sense at the time, and needs which the mentors can say with some assurance represent demands with which the individual must reckon in the future. Currently-evident needs have been discussed in the literature of education for a long time. Needs identified by "future planning" are only beginning to receive careful attention.

Assessment is also of two chief kinds: evaluation of the individual's success in mastering learnings which have previously been found necessary or desirable in his or her case, and determination of the individual's potential or probable success in mastering content yet to be presented. Accuracy in evaluation "fit" is always a problem.

### Balance Is Elusive

Other difficulties in achieving curriculum balance for the individual learner result from circumstances like the following:

1. Short-term and long-term goals of schooling for entire pupil populations have too seldom been specified. If general goals are ill defined, goals for individuals are even more obscure.
2. In the absence of clearcut goals for individuals, currently available experiences and materials cannot be used intelligently in educating individuals.
3. When goals for individuals become clear, and when experiences and materials are present in organized, usable form, conditions outside the school may shift so rapidly that presumably well identified long-term needs are no longer real.
4. Schools are usually unable or unwilling to provide the clinical setting within which personalized diagnosis and treatment

can occur. Lack of physical arrangements, staff, and financial support is often said to be the main deterrent. Behind this reason or excuse may lurk the suspicion of school leaders that individual pupils and staff members cannot be trusted to use their time wisely when they are released from formal group activity.

5. Tradition in schools holds that time should be used formally, and in carefully prescribed blocks. This point of view is inimical to an open, clinical approach to diagnosis and learning.

6. Tradition holds further that curriculum is a race course common to numbers of participants running simultaneously. However, curriculum to achieve educational balance for the individual is necessarily a personalized matter.

7. Educational balance for the individual seems so remote a possibility that teachers and administrators are unwilling to provide for laborious decision-making to approach it. One of the elements in this decision-making is careful planning with individual learners, who should be helped to choose what they find appealing among the profitable options available to them.

This article is a plea for a beginning. A school or a school system somewhere should, in our opinion, experiment with working toward curriculum balance for a few individual pupils. To do this, the school or system would need to assemble a staff of professionals and paraprofessionals of varying competencies to work in a learning center with enough space, facilities, materials, contacts with the outer world, and communication with futurists to provide an unusually rich and reasonable learning environment. The staff would need to know the few pupil enrollees in ways that individual pupils have seldom been known by adults.

The staff would work with the pupils and other persons inside and outside the school in determining goals of schooling and of out-of-school education which could be modified and supplemented to serve the individual case. In 1959, Kimball Wiles suggested the following general goals: (a) con-

tinuous improvement in mental and physical health; (b) continuous growth in the fundamental skills; (c) continuous growth in the development of a set of values; (d) continuous growth in creative ability; (e) continuous growth in skill in making independent and intelligent decisions; (f) continuous growth in individual interests and in skill in following individual interests; (g) continuous growth in skill in democratic group participation; and (h) continuous growth in acquisition of an understanding of our cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup>

Ideas, facilities, materials, and time arrangements which attainment of the goals required would be tailored to the needs of individual pupils. Careful assessment of the nature and needs of the individuals would, of course, be an initial and a continuing activity, so that each pupil would soon have his or her own curriculum. The staff, aided by pupils and outside personnel, would keep abreast of the findings of futurists in planning strategies for increasing individual youngsters' adaptability to changing conditions in local community, nation, and world. A detailed status and progress chart would be kept by and for each pupil; retesting, reinventorying, and reconsideration of the individual's needs would become standard practice; and summary data would be assembled at intervals for each individual. From summary data and attitudinal responses of the participants, there would come a report to the profession concerning the worth of the experiment in achieving its ends.

Participants in the experiment would be working consciously *toward* curriculum balance for the individual learner. As the 1961 Yearbook of the Association makes clear, actual achievement of assured balance, even for brief periods of time, may be an effect almost impossible of realization. But in a day in which we make great pretense of individualization and in a day of special funding, we owe ourselves and the people we serve a report of an experimental odyssey into this, an outer reach of individualization. □

<sup>2</sup> From the article, "Seeking Balance in the Curriculum," which appeared originally in: *Childhood Education* 36 (2): 69-73; October 1959.

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