

On a Certain Historical Blindness in Educators

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*Our curricular past has much to tell us
about current practices.*

THE Bicentennial celebration in America has already produced numerous attempts to encourage citizens to reexamine and reevaluate their history. This would be equally productive for educators, particularly since American education has had a certain historical blindness in interpreting its curricular developments. As Kliebard noted: "One of the disturbing characteristics of the curriculum field is its lack of historical perspective" (1970, p. 259). Likewise, Eisner observed that a "more adequate" theory of curriculum has not developed, partially because the "past has not been prologue" (1967, p. 132). Curriculum history, not as sources of erudition or triviality, ought to be the means for supplying bases for decision making, evaluating the consequences and intents of the curriculum, and reducing the naïveté and innocence of educators as they approach the demands of curriculum development. Certain lessons might be learned from the historical analysis of the conditions and influences upon the curriculum in American schools.

The most obvious lesson to be learned is

the general absence of history, information, implications, and results of curriculum programs that have occurred in the past. A general vagueness about the historical developments in curriculum is illustrated when the comprehensiveness of the field is defined. "The curriculum consists of two different things: the content and the learning experiences, or the mental operations that students employ in learning content" (Taba, 1962, p. 265). The inadequacy of educators' examination of these elements becomes self-evident when the lack of historical sophistication is revealed. Bellack referred to this inadequate examination as an "ahistorical stance" toward curriculum development.

To say that the contemporary curriculum problems have historical roots is to be guilty of a commonplace. But given the pervasive ahistorical posture of the curriculum field, it is a truism that curriculum specialists would do well to keep in mind (1969, p. 288).

Becoming historically cognizant, sensitized to the consequences and the carry-over of the past, becomes a source for appropriate decision making. Many traditional practices

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are justified only in terms of their historical durability rather than their importance, influence, or effectiveness in the classroom situation. By gaining a historical perspective, educators might attack more rationally the problems of improving the content and the learning experiences that occur in today's classrooms. Many of the anachronistic subject areas, fundamentally impervious to change, could be discarded because of their historical inefficacy. And many of the types of experiences, rules and regulations determining those experiences, and the justification and evaluation of those "happenings" might be scrutinized more closely after a historical sensitivity is obtained by those who intend to develop curriculum progress.

Schools: A Social Elixir?

One of the lessons to be learned from the past is the inability of the curriculum to be a panacea to all of the society's problems. As Perkinson appropriately documented: "From the beginnings the schools had been

viewed as the panacea—first to preserve civilization, then to prepare for the unexpected, and finally to guarantee good government" (1968, p. 11). Racial injustices, economic inequalities, corruption in government, and urban problems might all be solved through education. But such a hope for a social elixir was frustrated by the results. Historically, the ability of the schools to reform society massively seemed falsely ambitious and idealistic.

Yet the belief persists that we could (if we played our cards right) control man's future through education. So we continue to insist that, if only the schools got on with it, they could make the next generation shape up and in the process rid society of prejudice, poverty, and pollution (not to mention VD, drug abuse, racism, and the oppression of women). . . .

This is not because the schools fail in their duty but because it is simply not in their power to initiate planned social change. . . . To hold teachers responsible for the shape of tomorrow's America is therefore both futile and unfair. It isn't that they can't. Education just doesn't pack that kind of clout (Bassett, 1972, pp. 16-17).



Certainly the schools cannot, nor should they, withdraw from the social and political activities of this nation. But historically, the tasks sometimes assigned to them have been beyond the possibilities of the schools. A literate, aware, informed, and even a healthier society may be promoted through the schools. Yet when every social problem is quickly thrown to the schools, as illustrated by education's curricular past, without governmental or public support, philosophically or financially, the remedy is beyond the capacity of the schools.

Another needed historical perspective on the curriculum is a review of the goals, objectives, and expectations stated for the schools. With each crisis, emergency, or need, a formal goal is stated for the schools. Indeed, schools have had difficulty in defining specifically what they were to do. Conservative, romantic, radical, or progressive—each has promoted euphemistic slogans, many of them apparently congruent with one another. Hutchins (1965) claims that education should help people become more human. Rogers promotes the idea that "the only man who is educated is the man who has learned how to learn" (1969, p. 104). For Holt, the schools and experiences there should be as "interesting and exciting as possible, not just so that school will be a pleasant place, but so that children in school will act intelligently and get into the habit of acting intelligently" (1964, p. 159). History is filled with platitudes, generalizations, and glorified sentiments. As Perkinson described the Seven Cardinal Principles:

No one could argue against the seven cardinal principles of education, for example, but at the same time no one could take these aims seriously as policy to guide practice. They were a slogan, one that educators invoked to convince themselves and others that the schools could, and did, equalize or unify all students (1968, p. 149).

This general indefiniteness in American curricular experiences has created a difficulty in describing less where education has been than where it is going. A host of critics have condemned American education, not because

of its failure to accomplish certain things, but for the apparent haphazard way in which it did these things. When confronted, can teachers or administrators justify the content or the learning experiences in the classroom? Is a subject covered because, like Everest, it is there? Are certain practices, regimentations, and regulations imposed to improve the experiences in the school? Are these experiences and is the content to be learned congruent with those goals and objectives stated by the educators?

The success of goals and objectives in curriculum ought not to be their palatability and attractiveness, but the capability of applying and implementing them in practice. This would silence a great deal of the criticism, such as that by Silberman, that "schools fail . . . less because of maliciousness than because of mindlessness" (1970, p. 81).

Because adults take the schools so much for granted, they fail to appreciate what grim, joyless places most American schools are, how oppressive and petty are the rules by which they are governed, how intellectually sterile and esthetically barren the atmosphere, what an appalling lack of civility obtains on the part of teachers and principals, what contempt they unconsciously display for children as children. . . .

It simply never occurs to more than a handful to ask why they are doing what they are doing—to think seriously or deeply about the purposes or consequences of education (Silberman, 1970, pp. 10, 11).

Silberman continues that this mindlessness is the failure or ignorance to think rationally or seriously about the purposes of the educational institutions and the reluctance to question those sacred and established practices.

This history of curriculum development, of course, provides some insights into this situation. In a democracy, where multiple values and beliefs are theoretically not only permitted but encouraged, diverse objectives in the schools should be expected. History indicates that this is true. However, when history fails to illustrate the ambiguity and the indecisiveness of meaningful content and worthwhile learning experiences, the critics'

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condemnation is justified. History might lend some understanding on how to identify those goals and objectives acceptable and desirable for a school and then indicate the process of obtaining those goals. In the past, the history lessons remain unlearned.

External Factors Influence

Another historical perspective deserving attention is the general influence of external factors and forces that determine the curriculum. Macdonald astutely contends that “curriculum development is essentially a purposeful change in school programs” (1964, p. 313). The fact is that many of these changes occur without rational purpose. For example, with Sputnik, the national government and the public felt that the need for foreign language, mathematics, and science was obvious. Quickly programs were devised, teachers retrained, materials marshaled, and students systematically indoctrinated to accommodate these external pressures. The purposeful change occurring here was legislated, controlled, imposed, and evaluated primarily from sources external to the classroom experience. Controversy over textbooks and school programs frequently is a reflection of local biases rather than a rational approach to the kinds of learning and experiences that are best for the student.

Schools and the curricular programs offered must reflect the needs and functions of society. However, educators must also be capable of resisting those forces that would control and dominate the schools for their own private and selfish ends. Taba referred to the school as a countervailing socializing agent.

Education for readiness for cultural change needs to help the student to cope with change, to think about change, and to think for himself. In a rapidly changing culture people have to

cope with a good many situations that are strange to our current way of life. It is the educator's task to train the individual to recognize new situations when they arise and to meet them intelligently (1962, p. 68).

There are numerous social and cultural conflicts occurring because of the varieties of change and the functions of the schools in educating to meet these changes intelligently. Radicals, conservatives, segregationists, religious groups, and special interest groups, such as businesses, industry, military, and government, all desire a piece of the public school pie. The danger is that these competing forces will, in their haste to gain supremacy, kill the American school movement.

Curriculum's Bandwagon Effect

Historically, the curriculum has been subjected to a bandwagon effect. Many of these recur historically and seem to give evidence to the notion that history repeats itself. Perhaps it does when, as Santayana observed, those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. Then, as Goodlad wrote, “the new crop of reformers have approached the persistent, recurring problems of curriculum construction in the naïve belief that no one had looked at them before” (1966, p. 91). Two examples will illustrate this point.

Perhaps no single notion attracted attention as much as the behavioral objectives movement. Much has been said, both supporting and refuting this movement. Historically, the fact is that there was nothing new about the movement except the new heroes and leaders that championed it. Kliebard (1968) and Eisner (1967) indicated the historical background for the objectives movement. The fact that specified, observable behaviors could be established for the most detailed minutiae had its origins long before current day advocates.

Another illustration is the neglect of historical understanding about open and British education. The roots of these programs go back to the work of Rousseau and Pestalozzi and eventually to the progressive

movement. The concern with the student and his or her development as an individual is not a new or recent phenomenon. It has historical underpinnings that date it as an early and influential concern in the curriculum.

Finally, a historical perspective for curriculum development is appropriate in understanding the "scientific management" and "systems" that have affected changes in education. Again, these are not recent occurrences. As scientific management gained prominence, educators accepted the principles advocated by Frederick W. Taylor (Kliebard, 1971). The most effective program was the most efficient. In education, a "cult of efficiency" (Callahan, 1962) was instigated. Keeping the operation moving, utilizing a minimum number of resources to produce the greatest number of finished items, and seeking the behaviors that kept efficiency high could be applied to education as well as business or the military. Mass production and learning seemed totally compatible.

The notion that the schools can or should be compared to factories and businesses has caused some concern among educators. Study of historical evidence is worthwhile in determining the desirability

of these "efficiency" activities that have become more important than the children or the curriculum of the school.

As Perkinson notes,

We can improve our present theories, behaviors, and institutions by finding out what's wrong with them—by discovering their inadequacies. Once we uncover an inadequacy we can eliminate it by changing or refining the original theory, action, or institution. We improve through criticism (1971, p. 9).

Educators need to improve through criticism. In the past, a majority of the breast-beating and brow-wiping has occurred without a rational basis for this criticism. History, a perspective of the past, provides curricular insight dimmed not by the years but by neglect. Curriculum—the varieties and values of what is taught and the varieties and meanings of the learning experiences shared by teachers, students, and community—changes when forces and influences are exerted upon it. This change may be either irrational and ahistorical or it may be guided by intellectually aware and sensitive persons capable of implementing and evaluating experiences appropriate for the development of the child. We can "uncover an inadequacy" best by a logical documentation of our curricular past.

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