

# DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION: Who Owns the Curriculum?

Delmo Della-Dora

Most of us go through our lives looking for answers, without being sure what the questions are. We are like Gertrude Stein, who is supposed to have asked those gathered at her deathbed, "What is the answer? What is the answer?" No one replied. "In that case," she said, "what is the question?"

A major question facing us today is: "Who owns the curriculum in a democratic society?" We can try to understand what this question means by sharing the viewpoints of people affected by, or involved in, school curriculum. Consider the chief actors on the scene of curriculum development: state and federal governments, school administrators, teachers, students, community members, and supervisors.

## The Government: Disbursing Educational Funds

Turning first to government, we find that prior to 1954, education was seen primarily as the province of state governments. The advent of Sputnik in 1957, however, caused education to become a "U.S. Defense Industry," supported by the legislation of the National

*"Those who have the most power in education are the most likely to survive, and there are no natural allies for supervisors." Suggested here are six actions for ASCD members to consider, "... instead of participating in the power-grabbing contest that now surrounds us."*

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Defense Education Act. Soon, federal funds combined with new revenues that the states, as a result of the Serrano case and other court decisions, were channeling to education. (The courts were requiring the states to assume more direct responsibility for equalizing and adequately financing educational opportunity in all local districts.)

One result of this increased funding of education from federal and state sources has been the delivery of a clear message by government: "If we are going to pay for it, then it

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belongs to us. We are going to see that the money goes for what we intended." To check on how the money is spent, the government has borrowed new management systems from other large institutions: the armed forces, big business, and industry. Government has also found it helpful to its purposes to define curriculum as certain bodies of knowledge and skills, which can be described in a curriculum manual and for which "hard" data can then be collected and measured.

### The Administrator: Retaining Decision Making

Administrators have another view of the curriculum. Many see themselves as "owning" the curriculum at the building level or central office level in the sense that they have the responsibility to make the official decisions or the official recommendations on curriculum matters at the operational level.

Most administrators believe in involving teachers, parents, and perhaps even students in educational issues. But, after this period of involvement, an administrator will tend to

say, "I am the one who has to decide." A few administrators have a low regard for involvement—seeing it only perhaps as good public relations or as a management technique for placating critics.

Whether they seek or minimize the involvement of others in matters relating to the curriculum, many administrators oppose the notion of going beyond involvement to actual, shared decision making. They describe such a step as "organized pooling of ignorance," "copping out behind a committee," or "not having guts enough to take responsibility."

Administrators who do not want teachers or students to share in deciding on curriculum are not necessarily guided by self-interest. Rather, they firmly believe that since they have the title, "administrator," and are paid high salaries, they either do have—or at least are expected to have—superior judgment in deciding all major educational issues. They also believe that their views are more altruistic than what they perceive to be the more provincial views of individual teachers or the relatively narrow, self-serving views of teacher organizations. Interestingly, the administrators who feel this way also tend, like the government, to describe curriculum in ways that a management system can use to provide the tangible, measurable, so-called "hard" data needed to make decisions.

### The Teacher: Emphasizing the Classroom

How about the teacher's view of the curriculum? Teachers are most likely to view the curriculum as what they themselves do in the classroom. If so, they may consider administrators to be people who do not really understand what it means to face kids day in and day out. To such teachers the term "administration" often conjures up a vision of people motivated by expedience, who are trying to impose, control, and regulate on behalf of the business office, or in political response to community pressures. "Administration" then becomes a set of forces for the teacher to learn to deal with or get around in order to do what he or she "knows" is best for the students. This belief becomes stronger as students come to the teacher with all kinds of problems, very



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*Children often have sidewalk conferences about school. What are they saying about the curriculum, and are educators listening?*

*Photo: James A. Parcell, The Washington Post.*

few of which fit the formal curriculum laid out in the curriculum manual or in the textbook. The teacher sees that for many students, especially those in larger schools, the real curriculum may be daily survival.

The polarization produced by this entire belief system is much the same as that which results from the dynamics used in organizing administrator groups. Teachers retreat to their own camp and say, "Not only do we really own the curriculum—we *are* the curriculum."

The adversary model of collective bargaining appeals to polarized groups of teachers and administrators because it reflects the joint mood of the two sets of antagonists. Each group sees the other as relatively insensitive, as encroaching on the rights that should go with their own job requirements, as having unreasonable expectations, and as making unrealistic demands on the other. The battle plan for each group is to determine who has the most might, and then to exercise that might to *force* the "opponents" to recognize what is fair and right—namely to see things "our way."

### **The Student: Questioning Authority**

Students, in high school and college particularly, tend to view the curriculum as what happens to them as they attend school—in the classroom, hallways, clubs, athletic events,

counselor's office, or principal's office. They are more skeptical than ever before in our history of the belief that either teachers or administrators know best or that schools know best generally. They are supported in their doubts by newspapers that point to people in the highest places in our society who lie, steal, cheat, and bribe.

Students are likely to respect some teachers, but think that a great deal of what goes on in schools is irrelevant, boring, and based on the personal opinion of some very fallible human beings. Many students believe that they can and should have something to say about what happens to them in school because they are old enough to voice their opinions and also because "knowledgeable" adults are not as smart as they ought to be.

Since the student view of curriculum includes course content, teaching methods, counseling, administration, school rules, co-curricular activities, disciplinary measures, and all other dimensions of school—the range of measures by which students judge the effectiveness of the school is broad in scope. These measures include their feelings about whether the rules are fair, about whether individual administrators and teachers are fair and competent, and about whether the school seems to care about student opinion. The criteria that students use also include their judgments about whether what

they are being taught seems to be of any use for what they are now doing or hope to do in the foreseeable future.

Students are making their feelings known. College groups are organized in a number of places already and are exerting strong influence on legislation affecting colleges. In California such groups are rated at twelfth in influence among 600 lobbies in affecting the state legislature. Students are evaluating the curriculum at the high school level also, and we can expect to see student appraisals as a significant force in both colleges and high schools in the near future.

As students organize, they follow the same pattern of other newly formed self-determination groups, namely, they tend to: (a) see all others as adversaries, (b) test the limits of other newly established power, and (c) be hostile or aggressive until such time as their role is clearly defined and recognized by others to their satisfaction. This transition process also describes what has gone on among teacher groups, administrator groups, and various citizen groups.

### The Citizen: Stressing Priorities

Finally, let's consider the lay citizen's view of curriculum. In recent years, citizen groups have formed to deal with schools on issues related to the treatment of minorities and of children of the poor. Not only have many citizen groups come into existence, but they also have developed certain skills in dealing with the school establishment and have continued to exert influence from the time of their formation to the present. According to these groups, too much of the curriculum is being devoted to white, middle class people, and "schooling" is operating to keep minorities and the poor in their "place." The curriculum is viewed by them as the course content; content of textbooks; the race, ethnicity, and social class of the teachers and administrators; the nature of school rules; and, in some cases, the language of instruction.

Measures of curriculum effectiveness used by many community people have to do with: (a) whether their children seem to learn "basics" for survival in the society; (b) whether the content and operation of the school seem to give students pride in their own race and eth-

nicity; and (c) whether the teachers and administrators seem genuinely to accept, understand, and share *their* concern about the learning of *their* children.

Increasingly, more community groups, like student groups, are being organized in reaction to both organizations of teachers and of administrators. Members of reactionary student and community groups tend to see educators as becoming self-serving and as people who are, therefore, not to be trusted.

### The Supervisor: Seeking an Ally

What of the curriculum specialists who are neither administrators nor teachers, but supervisors? Most curriculum workers probably want to believe that teachers, students, parents, and administrators should *all* be involved in deciding on the curriculum—but their desire is often frustrated because their expert knowledge of particular curricular areas or their suggested methods for developing the curriculum are ignored, minimized, or lost in the midst of a power struggle among contending individuals and groups. They say, "We as curriculum workers really know more, through training and study, than anyone else about what the curriculum should be. We should have more authority to decide what it *will* be." However, the ranks of curriculum workers are rapidly dwindling in a number of states and districts as power becomes a paramount issue.

Those who have the most power in education are the most likely to survive, and there are no natural allies for supervisors. The administrators who believe they hold their positions and are paid more because of superior judgment want—not more supervisors engaged in curriculum development—but the design and implementation of better "delivery" systems. Many teachers also oppose curriculum workers, claiming that supervisors have the "cushiest" job of all, because they have none of the hassle of handling either classroom or administrative problems.

### Vying for Power

What happens when so many people claim ownership of the curriculum and define it in diverse ways?

We can proceed in at least two different directions in matters related to the curriculum of the schools. One way is to continue to have the divergent attitudes just described. Each of us can say, "I own the curriculum but no one wants to let me have it. So, I will join the group that promotes the best interests of my job or my role (teacher, administrator, parent, student, lay citizen) and have my group do more of what it is already doing to fight the others for power." The contest then requires that my group seize the most power in order to protect my set of interests at the expense of others. ("Anyone who is not with me is against me.")

The contest between groups will last until one or several major ones have the dominant power and can exercise their might over the others—or, at least, develop an uneasy "detente." Remember, however, that if we play the power-grabbing game, students and parents, because of their sheer numbers, can exercise the greatest potential strength, particularly at the ballot box. Next come teachers, followed by administrators, and lastly—supervisors and other curriculum workers.

Follow the current paths, and the solutions will be those imposed by might and not necessarily by reason. Join in "the contest," and energy that could be devoted to more productive purposes will be spent on arguing. Take the power-grabbing path, and it will lead to the employment of more professional bureaucrats, arbitrators, negotiators, lawyers, and judges.

Most of what I have described so far involves our drive for power, based on the premise that other people cannot be trusted. The need for a sense of power over others strongly reflects insecurity and lack of faith or lack of trust in one's own sense of adequacy as well. Insecurity, anxiety, distrust of others, a sense of powerlessness, and a sense of personal inadequacy are a miserable base on which to develop curriculum.

### Measuring Curriculum Effectiveness

Some current measurements of curriculum effectiveness provide one example of what systems based on distrust and on fighting for power do to us. How do we measure the curriculum effectiveness of a local district when



*How can we measure the effectiveness of the above learning situation—or any other? If schools rely too heavily on "hard data," suggests author Della-Dora, they may overlook important educational goals. Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.*

we think other people cannot be trusted and need to be checked on? One way is to define the curriculum as bodies of knowledge and skills and then describe it as such in a state curriculum manual. If we distrust others, we want hard data to tell us who is at fault.

We will then measure results achieved through the least expensive and most easily administered means—norm-referenced achievement tests, intelligence tests, or criterion-referenced achievement tests. In so doing, we will almost always leave out, as being "too expensive" or "too difficult" to measure, a few "minor" goals, such as problem-solving ability, democratic decision-making ability, creative thinking, and most of the learning attributes that should distinguish a democratic society from a totalitarian one.

The tests we do use will discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities and children of the poor, but we will have our inexpensive "hard" data.

*Where does this approach to measuring effectiveness lead?* In some states, like California, test results are published in the newspaper. Some teachers and administrators then feel compelled to teach for success on test items instead of on all their major goals. Recently, accountability models have required the establishment of objectives, and verified achievement of those objectives as the measure of success. One problem with this kind of model is that behavioral objectives define only a *sampling* of responses that may indicate achievement. Each major goal in education

can be described by several thousand specific, observable behaviors. In addition, the question of which behaviors in what combinations are representative of the whole goal has not even been the subject of research yet.

In California, we now have a 25-page manual telling college and university faculty how to write competency-based teacher education programs. A person from Sacramento comes out to see that we have provided all the details required and at least one other member of that staff also checks our work. We then must keep records to verify that we have done everything we said we would do. Finally, an external assessment team composed of as many as 90 people examines each institution's operation over a period of six to nine months to check on the checkers.

This process reminds me of a story I heard recently in the state of Washington, about a village in India where monkeys were stealing the harvest. The villagers hired some monkey-catchers to watch the monkeys but found that the watchers were also stealing some of the harvest—and so they had to hire people to supervise the monkey-catchers. A new class of

government employee was thus born—the “monkey-catcher-watcher.” We can certainly solve California's unemployment problems in a hurry if we continue to have creative systems like this.

### Moving Toward Conciliation

Let us spend more on curriculum planning and curriculum workers and less on monkey-catcher-watchers. I would specifically suggest at least six actions for ASCD and for ASCD members to consider, instead of participating in the power-grabbing contest that now surrounds us.

1. Continue to welcome into ASCD membership *all* people who have an interest in, and desire to work for the development of curriculum and the improvement of its supervision. This is fundamental to all other efforts. We are the *only* national group left that deals with the total curriculum of all the schools, at all levels, and which also has an open membership. ASCD is the last meeting ground for considering the total curriculum of *all the children* of all the people.

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The message of open membership is: "We believe that everyone who cares about the curriculum and is affected by it owns some piece of it." Right now, we need to make the message even clearer to parents, teachers, and members of all racial and ethnic minority groups by saying, "We need you. You are welcome." Every state unit and the national ASCD could be more active in recruiting to be sure that every group knows it is wanted.

2. ASCD's own governance ought to be a model of openness to widely varying perceptions of the curriculum. ASCD should also employ practices designed to have those varying perceptions accommodated with respect. We do that to some extent now, but we need much better systems for larger numbers of individual members to become actively involved in ASCD activities at both state and national levels and for ASCD to respond more effectively to their needs and wishes.

3. ASCD, at both the state and national levels, could develop institutes and workshops that will train interested administrators, teachers, supervisors, students, and community people in ways to *share* power, and to be activists on their own behalf, without doing so at the expense of others. The skills taught must include how to deal with contending views of who owns the curriculum and of what the curriculum is. We could, for example, devote time to developing a collaboration model for collective bargaining instead of the current adversary model borrowed from business and industry. We are not compelled to repeat other people's mistakes.

People often ask me, "Isn't it naive to think anyone will want to give up power or want to share it?" Generally speaking, the answer is "yes." It is "yes" because too few people have had the opportunity to find out that sharing power does not have to mean giving up power. As a matter of fact, sharing power can actually result in more power for everyone involved. The group dynamics people coined a word to describe this in the 1950's: "synergy."

Synergy is the synthesizing of a group's energy through use of effective group processes. Illustrated simply, it means that if I share an idea that proves useful to you and you do the

same for me, each of us has given away *one* idea but now has *two*. In the new math of power sharing,  $1+1=2$ . Furthermore, if in *really* listening to each other's ideas, we create a new idea through interaction, each of us now has three:  $1+1=3$ . However, if I am in a group to promote only *my* ideas and fight for their adoption, I may never even listen to yours, unless to learn how to defeat them. If the setting is an adversary one, this is very likely to be the case.

I have participated in power sharing in many different settings: in a small rural area in Michigan, where I was a principal 24 years ago; in the Detroit Public Schools, where I worked with 28 bargaining units; and in a small affluent suburb in California, where I was a middle school principal. In my experiences in these three dissimilar settings and in many others, I found that power sharing worked ultimately, but that the transition from power grabbing to power sharing was stormy, sometimes noisy, frequently painful, and most of all, slow.

Participants in the transition went through certain stages. At first they were wary, and suspicious or hostile. They wanted to test others to see if they had plans to "involve" them in a hidden agenda. Teachers wondered if administrators would veto actions or try to manipulate them. They were protective of their power, acquired only in recent years, and not enthused about having students and parents come on the scene to share it. Parents and students were equally suspicious. How could educators really care about their troubles, they thought. Those of us working for power sharing attempted to gain the trust of all groups by trusting them, by laying all our cards on the table, by giving them all the information we had, by disclosing all our feelings, and by displaying our uncertainties and ignorance, as well as our knowledge. When we were all through, everyone could say truthfully, "The curriculum is ours. We own a piece of the action." And with the sense of "ownership," came a commitment to making the plans work. The odds for success are greatest when we see some of ourselves in what we are trying to do and when we believe in our efforts.

4. In addition to: (a) working for even

more open membership and more responsive governance in ASCD, and (b) sponsoring training in power sharing, ASCD could lead in the development of true community schools.<sup>1</sup> This would require teaching each of ASCD's constituencies how to participate in effective curriculum development with other educative forces in the community. The methods used would include workshops and courses for students, for parents, for teachers, and for administrators.

It is time to bring together, in a coordinated effort, all groups working for the education of children and youth. Young persons are not to be excluded, for they can help now, while they *are* young, to improve their communities and the quality of life. We must realize that education, which is much more than "schooling," does not have to be a preparation for *only* the future.

5. ASCD could lead in developing and fighting for ways of evaluating that are valid and appropriate for a democratic society. To do so, we have to keep reminding ourselves that we learn with our thinking, our feelings, and our body—every part of our "being." Each person derives a different meaning from a school experience based on his or her total being. For example, we rarely, if ever, ask the participants in the school processes, "How do you feel about what's happening to you?" And yet, feelings may have more to do with the success of administrators, of teachers, and of students than any set of data available—including the best, most valid tests on the market. Feelings about self-worth, personal adequacy, expectation of success or failure—all are vital to meaningful curriculum evaluation. They *must* be assessed.

True evaluation also means assessing all goals, not just those easily quantified, readily administered, and inexpensive to carry out. For example, learning how to engage in democratic decision making is absolutely essential to our survival as a democracy, as is reducing racial and religious prejudice; yet, who is assessing the achievement of these goals and in what ways?

Let us also continue to fight against evaluation approaches that measure symptoms or samples of behavior and treat them as if they were the whole of what is being assessed or the whole of education.

6. Finally, ASCD can—through its publications, governance, and activities—reaffirm its faith that all people are capable of being trusted, can be conscientious, can be humane, and can be competent. ASCD can then use the means within its power to foster conditions that allow and encourage people to *be* all that they *can be*.

We live in a time when most of us have felt very much alone, perhaps even unloved. We see ourselves as not having much worth, and as being unable to control what happens to us in our jobs or in our lives. The temptation is to find some security by associating with those we see as being similarly aggrieved or unhappy, and by lashing out at people or groups we see as being responsible for our misfortunes. This is the "victim syndrome" that ultimately leads to our own self-destruction. If we can remember that other people feel and hurt as much as we do, we are more likely to reach out to them, even if our efforts are not welcome.

Power grabbing is not a natural behavior; it is learned in an anxious, insecure world. If we choose, we can share power so that there is more for everyone. Then, we will not accept "what is" as inevitable, but show that we can shape our own destiny.

The essence of democracy is that power be shared so that all people who are affected by decisions help to make them. In a democratic society, the curriculum of the schools does not belong solely to all those who care about it. The curriculum of the schools represents the vehicle by which democracy itself will survive.

Who owns the curriculum? We *all* do, and we are *all* responsible for nurturing the curriculum so that it may serve both our own individual needs and the needs of all others. [E]

<sup>1</sup> Former ASCD Presidents, G. Robert Koopman and Alvin D. Loving, led the way in this area 30 years ago in Michigan. As Associate Superintendent of Public Instruction in the post World War II period, Koopman was the chief promoter of the community school concept. Loving was a local district and university leader in the movement.

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