

THE STUDENT AS DATA SOURCE

William E. Lipsky

Although education has increasingly become a student-centered process, students rarely make major curriculum decisions for themselves. These are still formed largely in their absence by legislators, administrators, project developers, instructors, and occasionally, parents, who, in designing opportunities for learning experiences, generally represent a number of constituencies and have to consider a variety of criteria. The student population provides them with only one set of factors and one source of data among many.

Giving Precedence to Students

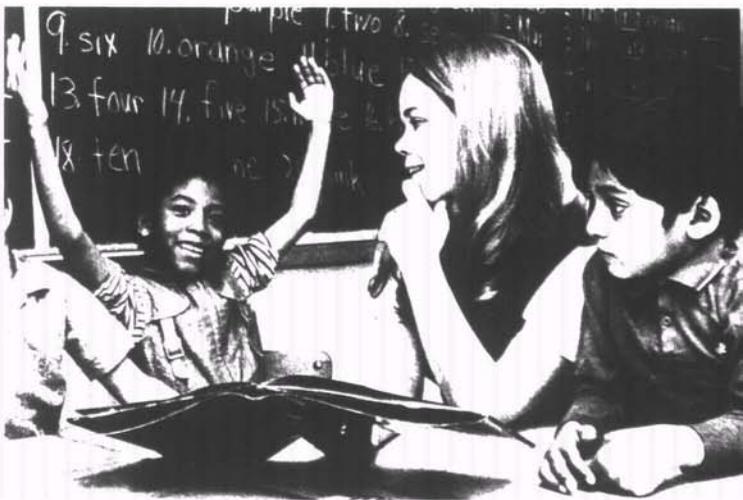
The social, legal, political, and practical considerations represented by various institutions and interest groups all have a place in the decision-making process. Students and their educational needs, however, should take precedence over other factors whenever possible. Otherwise curriculum designed for them often becomes arbitrary in both goals and content, molds students to the learning experience instead of the reverse, and fails to emphasize that which is most important at any given time to individual growth and development. Only by seriously

considering students first and foremost can planners develop meaningful, relevant educational programs in the learner's absence.

To avoid making arbitrary curriculum decisions, developers should learn as much as possible about the characteristics and capabilities of their intended student audience—its wants, needs, interests, goals, and abilities. A great deal of data is usually available. Some of it must be used with care, but planning cannot be either complete or valid unless this information is utilized as the basis of decisions regarding curriculum design, content, teaching strategies, and objectives.

The data about students gathered by and available to planners should be used by them to intelligently answer four essential ques-

How much can students tell us about themselves and how can we use this information to improve the curriculum? Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.



tions preliminary to curriculum development and implementation:

- Who are the students?
- What should they learn?
- How should they learn it?
- When should they learn it?

Answering these questions first puts learners and their education at the center of the decision-making process. Social and institutional

factors are not ignored, but rather, are placed in a secondary position where they belong, free from conflict with the needs of students.

Who Are the Students?

Obviously planners need and utilize information about the students for whom they are developing curriculum. Learners are typically



Curriculum planners should consider the whole student, contends author William E. Lipsky. Photo: Joe Di Dio, National Education Association.

considered and grouped for curricular purposes according to data about their physical and intellectual characteristics: age level; maturity level; IQ scores and other measures of intelligence; reading ability; grade level; and performance evaluations. These data, usually available in school records and published studies, offer some indications of the nature of a potential student audience and enable planners to gear curriculum to its capacities. However, these data present only a partial and often unreliable picture of learners, one that needs to be supplemented with other types of information.

In addition to physical and intellectual profiles, planners should also consider the educational characteristics of their potential students. What are the educational attitudes of

the learners, their approaches to learning, and their motivational patterns? How long are their attention spans? What are their study habits like? What are their backgrounds in the content area, and what interest, relevance, and value does it have for them? Such information is available from testing, interviews, and observations. It enables planners to gear their materials to the educational backgrounds and needs of the students.

Information regarding the socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds of students provides educators with still another important data source and supplies an added human dimension. Such information enables decision makers to see students as members of society, as well as individuals in a classroom. With it, they can plan appropriately for students in the context of their social learning, as well as for their intellectual and educational needs. Socioeconomic and cultural information helps planners to produce learning experiences that are as valid, appropriate, meaningful, and useful for students as possible.

In short, curriculum planners should consider the whole student. Learners, like everyone else, are people and, being people, they have differing characteristics, abilities, and backgrounds. A thoughtful analysis of their physical, intellectual, educational, and social natures should be the first step in curriculum planning for learning.

What Should Students Learn?

Few questions in education can be more controversial than those involving a choice of subject matter. Most content decisions in the past have been based on societal rather than student concerns and have resulted in curriculum that empha-

sized what planners thought students needed to know to function in present and projected societies. Decisions based on individual student or group interests and expectations, which are not necessarily distinct from those of society, are only now being made.

With students as the central data source for decision makers, and their needs as the central concern of curriculum planners, questions of what to learn possibly become no less difficult to answer; however, *content*, at least, can be determined on the basis of the differing educational and social requirements of students—a positive improvement over arbitrary

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or predetermined content selection. Not all students necessarily need to know the same things to lead useful and productive lives; knowledge or skills valuable to one person, are not automatically valuable to all. The answer, of course, is a flexible curriculum—one based on a thorough evaluation of students as individuals, learners, and members of society.

How Should Students Learn?

While questions of content can be difficult to answer, questions of presentation become relatively easy if data regarding students form the basis of the decisions. A wide variety of instructional methods, materials, and equipment exists. Once planners have determined who the students are and what their abilities, needs, goals, and expectations are, the selection of strategies and tools that

National Curriculum Study Institutes

November/December 1976



Teachers' Centers

November 15-16, New Haven, Connecticut (Sheraton-Park Plaza)

This institute will clarify the many different perceptions held about teachers' centers and show how teachers are actually participating in designing their own professional improvement programs.

Consultants: *Claire Henry*, Memphis (Tennessee) City Schools Reading Center; *Corrine Levin*, The Teacher Center, Inc., New Haven; *Polly Rauh*, The Teacher Resource Center, Stamford; *Vincent Rogers*, University of Connecticut.

Registration must reach ASCD by November 1.

Analysis of Instructional Strategies for Teaching Basic Skills

November 29-30, Chicago, Illinois (Sheraton Plaza)

The effectiveness of different instructional strategies and programs for improving basic skills will be examined in a number of discussions.

Consultants: *James Block*, University of California; *Leonard Coplein*, Haddon Township Public Schools, Westmont, New Jersey; *Roger Farr*, Indiana University; *Vincent Glennon*, University of Connecticut; *Philip Hosford*, New Mexico State University; *Melva Kliest*, Weyauwega (Wisconsin) Elementary School; *Thomas Sticht*, National Institute of Education; *Gita Wilder*, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey. Optional background material at special price—\$15

Registration must reach ASCD by November 15.

Practical Outcomes of Affective Education

December 13-14, Atlanta, Georgia (Atlanta American Motor Hotel)

The goal of this institute is to furnish educators with some specific ways of developing dimensions of affective education in children's school experiences. Co-Directors: *William D. Hedges*, University of Florida; and *Marian L. Martinello*, University of Texas. Key speaker: *Arthur Combs*, University of Florida.

Optional background material at special price—\$12

Registration must reach ASCD by December 1.

REGISTRATION FORM

- Teachers' Centers/November 15-16, New Haven
 Analysis of Instructional Strategies for Teaching Basic Skills/November 29-30, Chicago Packet
 Practical Outcomes of Affective Education/December 13-14, Atlanta Packet

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best achieve the desired objectives suggested by this information becomes fairly obvious.

Because different students learn at different rates and in different ways, decisions regarding the presentation of content should be based on a thorough consideration of the student population. Some methods are more appealing to different students than other methods. Some are more appropriate than others. Some are more effective. Knowledge of the learners for whom curriculum is being planned should make decisions apparent regarding format, methods, styles, materials, and equipment. Those best suited to the students should be those employed.

When Should Students Learn?

So little research has been done on this question that it remains one impossible to answer objectively. Bruner has stated that: "Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development,"¹ but should study begin at the earliest possible moment? If not, when? In the past, decisions on this question have seemingly been made for arbitrary reasons and have been maintained virtually by tradition.

Lacking data to the contrary, study of any particular content could reasonably begin when it becomes necessary or important to the students and their growth or development. That a student needs a particular body of knowledge or particular skills at a certain age or period of development should be the guiding factor here, not whether the information is conveniently taught or

predetermined for a specific grade level. Data about the students can certainly guide the decisions.

Seeking a Better Way

In a real world, curriculum decisions cannot be based solely on answers to the four questions posed here. Planning and implementation involve many considerations and constraints, including the three "f's" of education: feasibility, financing, and facilities. All relevant criteria have to be considered and should play a part. But students must, whenever possible, come first in the decision-making process. Programs must be tailored for them, not for institutions or special interests.

Utilizing students as the crucial data source and making curriculum decisions on the basis of the data will not automatically produce more meaningful learning experiences, but these seem to be the starting points, at least. Consulting student data may result in different programs for different students, each containing varying content, objectives, and formats even when it deals with "fundamental" knowledge and skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. But then, why should "basic" education be the same for different individuals and groups?

The schools simply cannot be all things to all people and they cannot be all things to different people. They can be, however, different things to different people. Who these people are, what they should learn, and when they should learn it—all can guide those involved in curriculum decisions toward making choices that more fully benefit the students for whom the procedure is ultimately undertaken. [27]

William E. Lipsky is Visiting Assistant Professor of Education, Pepperdine University, Los Angeles.

¹ Jerome S. Bruner. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960. p. 33.

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