Critical thinking and decision making must claim high priority in any education that is responsive to the needs of today and of the future.

The scenario unfolds on a pathway after a fresh snowfall. Charlie Brown holds a beautifully-shaped snowball as Lucy slowly slips by him. Lucy turns and says:

“Life is full of choices. You may choose, if you wish, to throw the snowball at me. . . . You may choose, if you wish, not to throw that snowball at me. . . . now, if you choose to throw that snowball at me, I will pound you right into the ground! If you choose not to throw that snowball at me, your head will be spared.”

As he reluctantly drops the snowball, Charlie remarks in the final scene, “Life is full of choices, but you never get any!”

A multiplicity of choices and various types of constraints pull us in at least two directions as we face the increasing complexity of decision making in our daily lives. We are currently bombarded by the issue, as many self-help magazines remind us, of our lack of coping and life skills. A magazine photo (Psychology Today, December 1977) portrays hands struggling to untie a massive knot in a rope as an introduction to problem solving techniques. Decision making finds a prominent place in the literature on citizenship/values/moral/global educational movements. Law-related studies and the 1977 annual convention agenda of the National Council for the Social Studies are filled with items relating to decision making.

Formal educators continue to echo the wisdom of the ancients when they suggest critical thinking and decision making as priorities: “help young people learn how to make judgments in terms of a previously accepted standard.”1 There is a renewed awareness of the rationale for formal education, that is, the cultivation of decision making particularly as it relates to political virtues that are appropriate to constitutional self-government and that are required to achieve a society that stands for justice, equality, and freedom in the modern world.

Even our sources of information conflict, which tends to lessen human credibility. On the one hand, we hear critics decrying the political, economic, historical, and global illiteracy of our learners.

The social situation urgently requires meeting the needs of learners, illuminating social realities, and fostering humane values. Yet simultaneously the social situation cuts budgets, discourages innovation, and denies funds for research and development. . . . We have not described the importance of problem solving through the exercise of intelligence as a road to morality in our democratic society.2

On the other hand, we are told by the results of a survey by the National Assessment of Educational Progress3 that almost 70 percent of 13-

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and 17-year-olds reported participation in decision making about school policies pertaining to at least two of the following four areas of concern:

- Change in school rules
- Improvements in buildings or grounds
- Increase in extracurricular activities
- Changes in ways decisions are made.

**Its Nature, Models, and a Model**

"Choice" is the key word in the "Peanuts" scenario. Decision making is essentially the making of reasoned choices from among several alternatives. The process may be of a personal or a social nature. Facts, opinions, values, and feelings influence the steps of the process at every level. Application, analysis, and evaluation are the major characteristics of the process. There need not be an action for every decision made, but it is certainly desirable to move in the direction of the resolution of problems through decision making that to some degree relate to the experiences of the decider.

Models for decision making come in various degrees of sophistication and complexity. Industrial psychologists, organizational analysts, computer specialists, statisticians, and business educators have been responsible for most of these models. Basically, there are three major steps in the process:

1. Identification of the problem, the goal(s), and the alternatives;
2. Examination of the alternatives and consequences; and
3. Decision and reflection on it.

As inadequate as a figure may be to really convey the human characteristics (impulsiveness, feelings, values, prejudices, subjectivity, and non-linearity) of decision making, Figure 1 is holistic and simple in design:

**Figure 1. Stages in Decision-Making Process**

1. Identify Decision Occasions and Alternatives
   a. Define the decision to be made
   b. Identify the goals of the decision maker
   c. Identify available alternatives
2. Examine and Evaluate Decision Alternatives
   a. Examine the probable outcomes of each alternative
   b. Evaluate and rank the alternatives
3. Decide and Reflect on the Decision
   a. Select an alternative
   b. Implement the plan of action
   c. Assess the results of action
   d. Consider recycling the process.

Usually the practice of making decisions is quite removed from the analytic approach described in the model. When persons are confronted with the myriad of problems and choices that daily living suggests, they normally: (a) consult accessible authorities (from the immediate media to resource works); (b) rely on intuition shaped by past experiences; and (c) use the most available solution. Such procedures imply that little skill in formal decision making has been developed to the point of an habitual response using the analytic approach apart from times when an immediate response is required.

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**Future ASCD Annual Conferences**

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Venue</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>March 3-7</td>
<td>Detroit</td>
<td>Cobo Hall</td>
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<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>March 29-April 2</td>
<td>Atlanta</td>
<td>Georgia World Congress Center</td>
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<td>1981</td>
<td>March 7-11</td>
<td>St. Louis</td>
<td>Congress Center</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>March 20-24</td>
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<td>Convention Center</td>
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Decision or judgment making is ultimately dependent on both the concept of freedom and the ability to operationalize or apply freedom. This may take form in the choices we make and those that are available to us; in our power of action to carry these out; and in our ability to develop wisdom, foresight, and skills. One can argue that this is a natural right without obstacles or restrictions (liberalism/laissez-faire individualism) or that freedom is a social benefit conferred by the collective intelligence of society. In the latter case, one would have to assume that society is capable of controlling itself wisely and therefore, morally. The conditions for achievement of such freedom are purposeful training, content selection, skill acquisition, techniques, and discipline for independent intellectual initiative and control over a subject.

The conditions for the new democratized society, for the just and good society, remain unrealized and subject to the fluctuations in survival needs (economics, employment, job security, and meaningfulness). Free schools, deschooling, parent power, budget power, and accountability move as with the tides of the seas. What storms or crises will affect them next? Anti-social behaviors and threatening educational environments increase. Schools are expected to curb or remedy this while other basic units of our society change their roles. Compound the frustration by the awareness that adequate assessment of most educational innovations has not been accomplished regardless of curricular and product development. What is going on in our schools? John Goodlad has aptly replied:

...our knowledge is exceedingly limited...we have developed neither an ethnography of schooling nor the cumulative knowledge and insights that ultimately would emerge from systematic inquiry into representative samples of school.

Just Where Are We in Professional Development?

It has been stated that a desirable outcome of education for judgment and action is to enable learners to habitually make adequate high quality judgments and to act upon them. This is to be achieved through mastery of the process and opportunities to engage in making practice-judgments. This goal and these means are theoretically within the context of a democratic ideology that advocates principles of justice, equality, human dignity, and participation in the destiny of the society. Yet the discrepancy between the ideal and the real is considerable, if not enormous.

The evidence for such a judgment is more intuitive than scientific or analytic. This is so precisely because we have so little hard data either about what is happening in the schools or in teacher formation, that is, preservice, in-service, and continuing education for teachers. My experience in working with teachers at all levels and in attempting to remain knowledgeable about current developments in this comprehensive field tells me that very little is actually being achieved in mastery and in opportunities for skill acquisition in decision making. I quickly qualify this to mean very little is being achieved through any systematic and consistently integrated manner. The reasons for this state of affairs are legion and each one might suggest at least one book, for example, alienation of youth, the nonparticipatory nature of educational institutions, competition of subject areas, lack of competency or mastery training or orientation, and the uncontrollability of established structures and procedures.

In countries with which I am familiar and whose heritage has been the democratic ideology, that is, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States, I can easily count

on two hands the educational agencies and projects that have seriously worked at promoting mastery and opportunities for decision making. Yet in each of those countries proportionately vast amounts of money have been or are being expended on the administration of public agencies, task forces, and inquiries in order to arrest the social ills or to adapt to rapid and demanding value changes.

Preventives and Hopes

In the midst of all this incongruity, there are slight rays of light at the end of the tunnel. The professionals are slowly becoming aware of the symptoms of the crisis. The nonprofessionals are demanding some form of accountability as if behaviors were easy to form, control, and assess. Experiments in Ontario (some ten projects), Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Tacoma suggest some positive changes in students and schools. Research and development centers (Mershon at Ohio State University; Research for Better Schools, Inc.; Social Science Consortium) are demonstrating some leadership in the area. It is premature to suggest the outcomes of these tenuous projects scattered across North America. Very often they exist in a high-risk atmosphere dangling from a thin thread of fiscal support determined by the annual crises in a sea of changing priorities. Several of them have impressive goals and materials. But the test of implementation and validation has not been either permitted or applied in most cases. One ray of light as it relates to the larger system comes from the "Responsibility Education" project in the state of Illinois. Another comes from a general interest by government offices in Ontario and in Washington, D.C.

Until parents and educational leaders, that is, those who ultimately control the allocation of support, insist on or demand that skills, knowledge, and attitudes associated with competent decision making be attended to in a consistent, continuous, systematic, and integrated manner, there will be little enhancement of this skill. It is to the credit of a number of professional associations that they have identified such an issue, for example, the National Council for Social Studies, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the Ontario Public School Men Teachers' Federation. As most educators face declining enrollments with all its allied problems, there will be a tremendous need for leadership and perseverance to both retain and promote what many may perceive as "frills" or "window dressing" regardless of all that has been said and demonstrated about the role and importance of these truly "life skills."

Changing structures means changing persons both collectively and individually. Perhaps one can begin with at least self-reflection on whether or not the conditions needed for decision making in classrooms exist. The necessary but not sufficient conditions are:

- An open atmosphere permitting diverse viewpoints
- Opportunities for decision making
- Provision for the analysis of the process
- Opportunities for systematic instruction on thinking and information-gathering subskills
- Hard work and self-discipline.9

9 See the many instructional materials cited in various professional periodicals and special issues, to name a few: The History and Social Science Teacher. London, Ontario 13(1); Fall 1977; Journal of Moral Education (Berk, England: NFER); Moral Education Forum (N. Y. C.); Social Education (NCSS); Theory into Practice (Ohio State University) XVI:Z; (April 1977); and Publications of ASCD, Phi Delta Kappa, Research for Better Schools, NCSS, and College Entrance Exam Board.

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