

# The Realities of Curriculum Change: Into an Era of Uncertainty

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*These writers state, "We have entered a period of societal uncertainty." In this article, they examine such issues as the present tax revolt, equal educational opportunity, individualized instruction, and the controversy surrounding assessments. They look at how these issues may affect the curriculum worker.*

Many curriculum workers speak longingly of the "good old days" of the 1960s and even the early 1970s. During those times, as the story goes, there was growth, a spirit of reform, and, above all, a spirit of confidence and hope for the future. The long-sought ideals of equality of educational opportunity, lifelong learning, and humanized schooling seemed attainable. Technology was being mastered and employed. Alternative teaching and learning styles were recognized and dealt

with. Sophisticated instructional "systems" were developed and implemented. Programs were installed for students with special needs. Time was set aside for staff development. New structural arrangements such as team teaching, nongrading, and year-round schools were designed and adapted to local needs. In short, from one point of view, the past decades could be viewed as a "golden age" for change in American schooling. Certainly, there were "new" ideas of all kinds for those interested in curriculum reform.

Circumstances seem to be quite different today. In fact, there is a certain air of despair abroad among school people in general and curriculum workers in particular. The so-called taxpayers' revolt is causing school districts across the land to tighten their belts. Frequently, this means cutting newer, more innovative programs and/or long-standing programs that have only recently received more appropriate attention (for example, the arts, humanities, global education).

Likewise, declining test scores and a more general conservative attitude among the various schooling publics have created pressure for more attention to "the basics" and a movement away from alternative, more creative programs. The collectivization of teachers, as that group seeks adequate representation in the political processes associated with schooling, has created demands that, at times, seem to countervene the development of new curricula.

We have entered a period of societal uncertainty. Spiraling inflation, a wasteful war in Southeast Asia, perceived government ineptness and corruption, a threatening energy crisis and, above all, a general disillusionment with the promises of the great social reforms of the 1960s have caused the public to reject many of the emergent values of the 1960s and return to those values that are perceived as having "stood the test of time." While curriculum workers may long for the "good old days" of the 1960s, the general public, in many ways, seems to be rejecting them.

Obviously, there will not be an immediate resurgence of public support for educational change. This does not mean that there is not support for education itself. Quite the contrary is true. Current public opinion polls, including Gallup and the work of the National Opinion Research Center, suggest that the public has faith both in education and in the people who are running it. Some research shows that the public believes that more money should be spent for education, albeit not from local property tax sources.<sup>1</sup>

The point is, curriculum workers need not despair. In fact, now more than ever there is a need for strong and thoughtful leadership in the field. There is a need for consolidation of the curriculum gains made and the knowledge brought forth during the 1960s. As part of this consolidation, we must develop ways of assessing just how far we have come. Further, this is a time for careful examination of the pervasive trends in our society and a reconciliation of the curriculum of schooling to those trends. Also, we need to concern ourselves more carefully with the processes involved in curriculum improvement and change. We have learned a good deal about these processes over the past fifteen years, but have hardly begun to apply this knowledge in our field. Finally, we need to rekindle our enthusiasm; we need to re-

new our commitment to and faith in education; and, yes, we need to begin having fun again in what we do.

### Equal Educational Opportunity— A Continuing Task

The one feature of American schooling that has attracted worldwide attention for more than a century has been its ability to assimilate the foreign born and their children. The schools have assisted in the creation of mutual sets of understandings and a "common" heritage for the citizens and would-be citizens of the nation. The sixties saw the extension of this feature of schooling to persons of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

The extension of equal educational opportu-

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ity to all came about for many reasons—increasing urbanization, industrial and commercial growth, increasing wealth, and rising standards of living. The poor, minorities, middle-class, and intellectuals have combined their votes since the

<sup>1</sup> This finding results from A Study of Schooling, a research project conducted by the Institute for Development of Educational Activities (I/D/E/A) and directed by John I. Goodlad. Data were collected in 38 elementary and secondary schools in 1977 and 1978. The schools were selected so as to represent the factors of size, economic level, racial composition, location (urban, suburban, rural), and regionality of the country. Data were obtained using onsite structured questionnaire, interview, and observation methodologies. The resultant data base includes approximately 20,000 students, 10,000 parents, 1,400 teachers, 50 school administrators, and 150 school board members. Observation data were collected in more than 1,000 classes. Eight subject areas were specifically represented. The study examined school curriculum, student life in schools, the adult work life in schools and school-community relations. The results of the study are to be reported in various articles, monographs, and books during the next two years. The authors of this article currently are working on the preparation of these publications.

depression years to vote directly or indirectly for social reform after social reform, including the extension of educational opportunities of all kinds and to more and more people.

The current tax revolt as represented by Proposition 13 in California and similar movements in other states is evidence of the breaking up of this voter alliance. The economic conditions mentioned previously (for example, high taxes, inflation) are part of the cause of this change. However, these conditions, too, can be viewed as symptoms of even more serious alterations in the life patterns of Americans. Changes in family relationships, instant communications including television, job mobility, and even our "everything instant and franchised" material existence all tend to make us a nation of individuals with fewer and fewer group identities and commitments. Likewise, we have trapped ourselves in what Kozol calls "nonstop forward locomotion to the next good issue." That is, we go from movement to movement, issue to issue, seeking immediate solutions or satisfactions. We have difficulty sustaining our efforts for long periods of time to solve complex social problems.

To a degree, our schools have inadvertently contributed to this condition. In our effort to improve instruction, we have often interpreted individualization to mean each student working at his or her own pace in interaction with carefully sequenced materials. Indeed, such instruction is important and valuable. However, it needs to be balanced with meaningful opportunities for interaction with other students and with adults.

A related problem is the generally sad plight of social studies, seen by students as less important and less liked than many other subjects. If we hope to produce citizens who are aware of and responsive to the social problems of our nation and the world, it seems reasonable that curriculum workers must attempt to put life and real meaning into the social studies. Likewise, it seems realistic to assume that the social studies should be organized around the contemporary and future problems of humankind, and that the disciplines such as history, geography, anthropology, sociology, political science, and economics should all be brought to bear upon these problems. Again, there has been much good curriculum development along these lines over the past two decades. The

problem remains one of curriculum workers reviewing, testing, and adapting curricula to local needs.

Various categorically funded programs have been developed by state and/or federal governments as a means of providing equal educational opportunity to all. Given the economic conditions of our times, such programs may face cutbacks or, at best, they may not grow at a rate commensurate with the past. It may be that such programs will come under attack by various individuals or groups interested in budget cutting. Curriculum workers should assess such programs for their strengths and weaknesses, and should do whatever they can to make them as effective as possible. In particular, such programs should work to counter the forces that divide and isolate individuals and groups within our society.

### Assessing Where We Have Come

Assessment does not mean simply the accumulation of achievement test scores. On the contrary, if we are to consolidate the curriculum gains of the past decade, we need to take stock thoughtfully of a wide variety of factors at the *school level*. The following is a partial list of such factors:

1. Commonality of purpose—To what degree do parents, administrators, teachers, and students agree on the purposes that should guide curriculum development at their school(s)?
2. Program match with purpose—To what degree does the school program match the stated goals of the school(s)?
3. Decision making—Who is making what decisions for and at the local school(s), and how does this affect what happens there?
4. Quality of curriculum and instruction—To what degree are the various common elements of curriculum and instruction in evidence at the school(s)? This includes the use of objectives, materials, organization and selection of learning activities, grouping, time, use by teachers of principles of learning, and evaluation procedures.
5. Satisfaction—To what degree are parents, administrators, teachers, and students satisfied with the program and practices at the school(s)?

Implicit in such a list is the notion that curriculum planners must first deal with or at least

understand the realities of schooling before they propose curriculum changes and related teacher in-service education. Given the variety of curriculum innovations proposed and implemented over the past two decades and given the economics of schooling at present, it seems obvious that while future improvements should be data-based, what is required is more than outcome data alone.

One clear example of the need for accurate data rests with the cry for more basics. It could be hypothesized that "basics," defined as reading, English, language arts, and mathematics, already occupy a disproportionately large segment of the curriculum, and that the social and natural sciences, the arts, and vocational education are too often either overlooked or given short shrift by schools. Further, the questions we are raising about the basics may not even be the right ones. Rather than looking at amounts of instruction, we might do better to raise qualitative questions.

For example, National Assessment data show that if basics are considered as simple computation, literal comprehension, and writing mechanics, then many students are performing quite well. But if the basics are defined as the ability to apply those skills, then the data from NAEP suggest that we have a problem. Application skills test low and have for some time. Thus, it is too simple to suggest that we return to the basics. Rather, we need to proceed with the improvement of the instructional process to provide more students with basic problem-solving and application skills. The point is, we had better know what is actually going on in instruction in the basics before we call for more of it.

### Emerging Problems for Curriculum Workers

During the 1977 testimony of the House of Representatives Education Committee on renewal of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), some revealing data were presented that curriculum workers should know about as they plan into the next two decades and beyond. For example, data from the Office of Technological Assistance of the U.S. Congress show that approximately 45 percent of children born in 1976 will have lived with only a single parent at some time before they reach 18 years of age. Since single parent families frequently live in relative, if not

absolute poverty, there will be need for expanded services among which will be compensatory education. Since "compensatory" education has lacked adequate definition, it seems imperative that the concept be given such definition by curriculum planners at the local level. Does it mean more "basics," a good diet as supplemented by subsidized lunch and breakfast programs, pre-vocational training, intergroup education, or what? As part of any assessment of needs, certainly parental and student aspirations must also be considered.

These data also point out that more women at all levels of income are entering the nation's work force. In fact, in 1975 about 50 percent of all families contained two workers. The effects of this circumstance upon schooling are many and varied. Volunteerism will decline. Dual income families will have more discretionary income, which opens the options of moving out of the public school systems or moving from urban systems to suburban ones. If this trend takes hold with middle- and upper-middle class income groups, we will find ourselves with underclass school systems in the big cities. The consequences for equality of educational opportunity and the development of curricula which improve cross-cultural understanding are staggering. People cannot come together in thought when, in fact, they are physically isolated from opportunities to interact. The schools in our cities must be made attractive to all, and curriculum workers must move swiftly to develop programs that create improved crosscultural understanding.

The fact that more women are entering the work force will also create a need for day care services for preschool children and parallel child care services for older children after school. Also, projected declining enrollments through the end of the century will make for underutilized facilities and a surplus of teachers. These two conditions, put together, create a certain appeal for new child care services and curricula. The Office of Technological Assistance report rightly cautions planners not to overlook the need for young children to come frequently into contact with adults who can provide appropriate role models.

Data presented from studies of declining enrollments sponsored by the National Institute of Education suggest four fundamental strategies

available to policy makers. The first is to reduce staff and close schools; the second is enriched services for existing clients; the third is extension of services to unserved or underserved populations (for example, adults, preschool children); and the fourth is combinations of the above. All have implications for curriculum planners.

Layoffs of teachers or simple reliance on attrition will produce an older, more expensive teaching force. It could jeopardize affirmative action and gains made by women and minorities. While teacher age is probably not a predictor of willingness or ability to change, the loss of minority teachers could negatively affect efforts to develop crosscultural understanding in schools.

In the light of declining enrollments, a strong case can be made for reexamining the consequences of school size. Alternatives are the operation of small schools or multipurpose buildings that house a library, recreation, health, child care, or senior citizens center as well as a school. In this regard, curriculum planners would be well advised to review the various community education programs sponsored by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation of Flint, Michigan, and lately taken up by the federal government. The Mott projects are to be found all across the nation, and they have had quiet success for decades. They range all the way from increased parent involvement in schools to the type of multipurpose centers described earlier. An adequate assessment of community needs at the local level would give planners insights into the types of programs that they might develop.

Finally, the House hearings brought out the fact that immigration accounts for about a quarter of the net population growth in this country and that the great majority of the immigrants do not speak English. In a society where over 50 percent of the work force is in one form of communication business or another, serious questions can be raised about the social intent of bilingual education programs. That is, should bilingual education impart language skills only, should it teach non-English speaking students to cope with and/or adjust to the values of the majority culture, or should it attempt to preserve the original culture of non-English speakers? Further, what is the role of bilingual education vis-a-vis the English-speaking population? These are questions that deserve

thoughtful answers from the public, parents, professionals, and students. Again, it is a matter of ascertaining clear purposes prior to the design of curricula.

In addition to testimony on declining enrollments, the House Education Committee heard testimony on declining test scores. A pattern in achievement declines has been developing since about the mid-1960s. Such declines are strongly influenced by curriculum trends, including a decline in the total time of instruction received by secondary students and changes in specific course content from that which was offered ten years ago. Standardized achievement tests have not changed nearly as much as have the experiences of the children. The fact that instruction has drifted away from the tests is clearly one part of the decline. This would seem to call for curriculum planners to do a careful examination of what is taught at the local level. The intent would not be to move the curriculum more in line with standardized tests. Rather, it would be to develop assessment procedures that are in line with a curriculum based upon clearly articulated educational purposes stated at the local level, which are, in turn, based upon the social, intellectual, personal, and vocational needs of the population served.

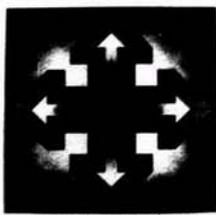
### Processes of Change

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, curriculum workers began to realize that the process of change was as important as its substance. Much of the literature on change initially focused upon how to get schools to adopt the many innovations developed during the 1960s. Later, and as the efforts to create change seemed not to be as effective as desired, the focus shifted toward creating an acceptance of new ideas in schools. As a result of this latter orientation, numerous strategies were designed that focused on increasing and maintaining a school's ability to cope effectively with its changing environments in the pursuit of its goals.

Networking, organizational development, linkage, and problem solving are some of the terms used to describe the more successful change strategies that have been employed in recent years. All have certain things in common: (a) the

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school is assumed to be the appropriate target unit; (b) the focus is upon developing conscious problem-solving abilities within the staff; (c) open communication and participatory decision-making are employed; (d) goal clarification is an initial phase in the process; (e) conscious linkage is made with resources outside of the school; (f) the principal is seen as a key leadership person; and (g) there is constant evaluation of the problem-solving process itself.

Such characteristics of successful change strategies have come about as we have realized that the simple mandating of new ideas, curricula, and/or behaviors is not enough. Change occurs slowly and new ideas need to be accepted and internalized as useful by those who are to implement them. For this reason, release time for people in the school is also necessary to successful curriculum change efforts.

The "good old days" may be gone. However, school people continue to do their essential job. The decisions they make about curriculum in a time of social pressure are crucial. They should not be made in reaction to those pressures. Rather, they should be made with awareness of the gains already made, commitment to assessment of the conditions that exist and the work yet undone, sensitivity to the emerging needs of the students and the community served by the school, and with thorough knowledge of how change best occurs in schools.

The future is still the challenge—and herein lies the reality and the enjoyment for those who would be curriculum workers in the years to come.



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