



# Common Experience Versus Diversity in the Curriculum

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*We can tell what curriculum should be like in the years ahead by surveying developments in education over a twenty-year period and by considering what post-industrial society will be like.*

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The curriculum should help youth prepare themselves for life in the society of the next generation of adults. This means they should learn the basic mental skills of literacy, numeracy, and more.

The "and more" is what concerns us in this essay. The curriculum must be effective with pupils of all social classes in the teaching of the 3 R's, and this is a major educational problem. Beyond this lies the all-important question of the content and structure of the curriculum as preparation for successful living.

To consider this question, we look ahead to the nature of American society during the rest of this century. Daniel Bell's description of the coming post-industrial society stresses the shift of the workers out of production of goods and into the provision of human services. In 1950, half of all workers were engaged in the production of goods; by 1980, 70 out of every 100 workers will be in services. These will be professional, technical, managerial, and clerical services. Today, these occupations make up 41 percent of the labor force. The new service economy will also employ many more women.<sup>1</sup>

The post-industrial society needs great numbers of people with at least a high school diploma. Education will provide the ladder of access to social status, income, and privilege.

Not only will the curriculum of secondary school and college train youth for careers; the curriculum will also be aimed to help them become competent citizens of an urban, democratic society.

The following will examine what kind of curriculum is needed for the next quarter-century using a survey of the past two decades, 1955-65 and 1965-75, which show some interesting and puzzling contrasts.

## The 1955-65 Period

The decade following 1955 was one of constructive change and improvement in American education. The American economy was prosperous, and the public school system was generally

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Bell. "The Coming of Post-Industrial Society." *The Educational Forum* 40:575-79; 1976.

approved by parents and community leaders. The National Science Foundation became interested in supporting collaboration of research scholars and school teachers to improve the curriculum. The NSF made its first big grant in 1956 to support the work of the Physical Sciences Study Committee (PSSC) headed by Jerrold R. Zacharias, professor of physics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

John Walsh, a staff writer for *Science*, described the NSF initiative and parallel developments in an article entitled "Curriculum Reform," which appeared in *Science* in 1964. He called the late 1950s a "new deal" in science and math for the high schools.<sup>2</sup> Supported mainly by the National Science Foundation, the following curriculum projects were carried through:

- Biological Sciences Curriculum Study (BSCS)
- School Mathematics Study Group (SMMSG)
- Chemical Bond Approach (CBA)
- Chemical Education Material Study (CHEMS)

During this decade James B. Conant, former president of Harvard University and then U.S. Ambassador to West Germany, returned to the U.S. and accepted a Carnegie Corporation grant of \$350,000 to conduct a study of the American high schools. Recruiting several practitioners of public secondary education to assist him, they visited 55 "typical" schools in 18 states over a period of several months, and he then wrote the book that appeared in 1959 under the title *The American High School Today*. He favored the comprehensive high school as a model, with the standard curriculum that was then being developed by the groups just named. It is interesting to compare this with the Report of the ASCD Commission on the Education of Adolescents, published also in 1959. Headed by Kimball Wiles and Franklin Patterson, one a southern educator and the other a New Englander, the report was entitled *The High School We Need*. "The secondary school should be a comprehensive school" is the first general proposition. There is slightly more emphasis on "general education" than Conant proposed. General education courses consist largely of social studies and humanities, and

should provide one-third to one-half of the credits essential for graduation.

### Bruner and "The Process of Education"

During this same fruitful 1955-65 period, the psychologists who were interested in education produced a synthesis of learning theory and social psychology that laid the basis for a new approach to the structure of the curriculum. By this time Piaget's major work on the development of intelligence from infancy to maturity had been translated into English and was being studied by curriculum-makers.

In the summer of 1959, the Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner secured funds from the National Academy of Science to pay for a ten-day conference at Woods Hole, Massachusetts, which brought a dozen psychologists together with the directors of several curriculum groups. Out of this conference came the book by Bruner entitled *The Process of Education*.<sup>3</sup> The human mind was conceived in this conference not as a storehouse of information, but as an instrument for learning. This led to Bruner's famous dictum that "any subject can be taught usefully to any child at any stage of development." This foreshadows the general idea that runs through present-day curriculum making: pupils should be taught the "structure" of a subject, rather than a summary of its content. They should learn certain habits of mind, ways of looking at the world, and ways of asking questions and organizing facts that will make their factual knowledge intelligible. Also at this time, J. Richard Suchman, then teaching at the University of Illinois, came out with his inquiry method of teaching elementary school pupils.

### The Shake-Up: 1965-1975

There was a marked change in the tone and content of curriculum discussion and writing beginning about 1965. Reasons for this include:

<sup>2</sup> John Walsh. "Curriculum Reform." *Science* 144: 642-46; May 8, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Jerome S. Bruner. *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960.

1. Passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. These called attention to the poor educational achievement of low socioeconomic and some minority groups in the public schools and brought out proposals for compensatory education of disadvantaged students.

2. The vigorous writings of a group of philosophical anarchists, disciples of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who opposed rules and institutions set up by society to regulate the conduct and development of its members. The ablest spokesmen of the anarchist group were Paul Goodman, John Holt, and Ivan Illich. Paul Goodman wrote: "We can, I believe, educate the young entirely in terms of their free choice, with no processing whatsoever."<sup>4</sup>

John Holt, in a 1971 book, answered a question directed to him by an educational journal: If America's schools were to take one giant step forward this year toward a better tomorrow, what should it be? His answer:

It would be to let every child be the planner, director and assessor of his own education, to allow and encourage him, with the inspiration and guidance of more experienced and expert people, and as much help as he asked for, to decide what he is to learn, when he is to learn it, how he is to learn it, and how well he is learning it.

It would be to make our schools, instead of what they are, which is jails for children, into a resource for free and independent learning, which everyone in the community, of whatever age, could use as much or as little as he wanted.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, there were many criticisms of the anarchist writers. For instance, B. F. Skinner, the famous psychologist at Harvard University, writing in the *Phi Delta Kappan* for September 1973 on "The Free and Happy Student" said, "the modern version of the free and happy student to be found in books by Paul Goodman, John Holt, Jonathan Kozol, or Charles Silberman is also imaginary." True personal freedom can only be gained by disciplined study of the real world, he argued, and this requires the assistance of a teacher. "The natural, logical outcome of the struggle for personal freedom in education is that the teacher should improve control of the student rather than abandon it."

3. Leaders of disadvantaged minority groups

wanted schools with curricula that would be most useful to their particular cultural groups. They were opposed to de-schooling; they wanted schooling that would accomplish two quite different objectives: (a) improve the basic mental skills of the pupils, and (b) help them become aware of and appreciative of their identity as members of a minority racial, language, or religious group. They want a pluralistic society, with schools helping to maintain such a society. Their position was strengthened by the passage of Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1967, known as the Bilingual Education Act. This provides federal government money for programs of bilingual-bicultural education.

### Curriculum for a Post-Industrial Society

Out of the present perplexity and complexity of the curriculum, and looking ahead to the nature of our post-industrial society, we may state three basic propositions:

1. The curriculum should stress the *structure* of the subjects that are studied, rather than the student storing up discrete bits of information. This will make use of much of what was done in the productive 1955-1965 period.

2. The curriculum should support a constructive and democratic cultural pluralism. This will contribute to:

a. Mutual appreciation and understanding of every subculture by the other ones

b. Freedom for each subculture to practice its culture and socialize its children

c. Sharing by each group in the economic and civic life of the society

d. Peaceful coexistence of diverse life styles, folkways, manners, language patterns, religious beliefs and practices, and family structures.

This policy will support the efforts of certain subcultural groups to maintain their separation from the economic and civic mainstream of American life—for example, the Amish and the Hut-

<sup>4</sup> Paul Goodman. "Freedom and Learning: The Need for Choice." *Saturday Review* 73; May 18, 1968.

<sup>5</sup> John Holt. *The Underachieving School*. New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1971. See also Los Angeles: Pelican, 1972. p. 5.



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