



# The Curriculum: Patchwork or Crazy Quilt?

Gail McCutcheon

---

*Most curricula in operation resemble a crazy quilt although the individual written curriculum may have resembled a carefully-designed patchwork at the central administrative level.*

---

Quilts are of two types. One, the patchwork quilt with a log cabin or wedding ring design, has a definite, preplanned pattern or style for the seamstress to follow with little deviation. The other type of quilt is a crazy quilt, made by sewing together scraps gathered from hither and yon, where the shape and nature of pieces is determined by the scraps themselves and by the shape and nature of adjoining pieces. The same can be said of curricula. In some settings, to a certain extent, the curriculum is predetermined and in others its own character emerges. In curriculum work, a continuum exists between predetermined and emergent curricula.

In the spring of 1978, three research assistants, twelve teachers, and I studied the curricula of 12 elementary school classrooms, the decisions

leading to those curricula, and various influences upon the decisions. Our study revealed several features of curriculum planning at local schools and forces operating at different levels, which led to disjointed, often unharmonious programs and the lack of a clearly coordinated curriculum design. We concluded that most curricula in action resemble the emerging crazy quilt rather than the preplanned patchwork quilt. A written curriculum may exist at the central administrative level, but in operation, the character of the curriculum emerges. This does not necessarily lead to a faulty curriculum; when examined, a crazy quilt or an emergent curriculum can have unity and an obvious, artful structure while retaining its particular

<sup>1</sup> Research reported in this article was supported in part by Ford Foundation Project Number 785-0160.

character. But it can also be disjointed, irregular, lacking in coherence and balance. This article will discuss several potential influences on the curriculum that produce an uncoordinated emergent or preplanned curriculum, points at which intervention may be possible, and areas for further research and evaluation.

### Influences on the Curriculum

Rather than making curriculum decisions autonomously, schools must respond to many groups when choosing what to offer. Curriculum planning occurs to appease groups such as the Chamber of Commerce who desires a workforce, the legislature who desires proven competence, or people concerned about sex and ethnic stereotyping. As a result, conflict among programs chosen to appease various groups may result; the orientation of the career education program may be at odds with ethnic identity programs. Programs chosen to satisfy state-determined minimum competencies may also add to the conflict. For example, recently several school systems in New York and Virginia decided that if a child's reading or mathematics achievement test scores fall more than two years behind grade level, the child will repeat the grade. This regulation is in philosophical opposition to schools operating with a continuous progress plan. Items on achievement tests may not be in accord with what is taught in reading and mathematics, leading teachers to revise the program being used so their students will not be incapacitated.

Legislative regulation about the teaching of alcohol or drug abuse, civics, and safety<sup>2</sup> add to the confusion as do federal programs aimed at mainstreaming or at the disadvantaged. Boards of education and administrators, hoping to appease pressure groups, to satisfy state mandates, and to qualify for federally-sponsored programs are in a quandary when considering what is to be taught and how to accomplish the various goals.

A common course of action is the formation of systemwide textbook adoption committees or curriculum committees comprising teachers and administrators. Such committees often work independently when adopting or developing programs. As a result, the programs may be based on learning theories or philosophical orientations

in opposition to one another. For instance, the mathematics program in one system teaches metrics through conversion, while its science program teaches metrics through immersion in metric measuring activities. Another school's social studies program develops independent problem solvers, while teachers believe its mathematics program leads to dependence on teachers.

The lack of coherence among programs is further heightened by state or systemwide regulations that may interfere with the adopted program. For example, in one system, the adopted experiential science program cannot be implemented as intended due to schoolwide scheduling of 25 minutes a day for science. By the time the teacher and each of 28 children have obtained equipment necessary for experiments, no time remains to carry through to the hoped-for discovery. The 25-minutes-a-day regulation was not in effect when the science program was first adopted. But by allotting more time now to reading and mathematics than to science, it is hoped that low achievement test scores can be raised.

Those problems relate to a general lack of understanding or dedication to the purpose or orientation of a school system. Decisions made at odds with the system's orientation confuse educators working in the system. In-service courses aimed at helping teachers adapt programs to the general purpose and helping them use and understand the programs are lacking. Additionally, teachers who work on textbook adoption or curriculum committees are usually the schools' best teachers in the view of the administrators. These teachers most in need of understanding the program are not afforded the opportunity due to lack of in-service experiences.<sup>3</sup>

Also relating to the problem is the fact that teachers report a tendency to plan activities for approximately a week in advance. They view long-range lesson planning as a wasted effort due to schedule changes arising from snow days,

<sup>2</sup> See: Claude P. Duet *et al.* "Trends in Legislating Curriculum." *Educational Leadership* 33:468-71; 1976; and, G. D. Marconnet. "State Legislatures and the School Curriculum." *Phi Delta Kappan* 49: 269-72; 1968.

<sup>3</sup> See: Gail McCutcheon. Review of Donald Doll's *Curriculum Improvement. Curriculum Inquiry*, in press.



reshuffling of classes, and assemblies. Additionally, teachers believe the textbook does much of their long-range planning for them. Short-range planning may mitigate against conceiving of and keeping in mind the whole, the system's overall orientation.

The picture revealed, then, is one of a lack of understanding of the overall intent of the schools, further confused by the schools' attempts to satisfy demands of many agencies and groups. If a coherent plan exists, it is not understood well by educators. Nor is it understood by pressure groups or agencies making demands in contradiction to the aim of the school. Where could we intervene in this pattern to facilitate the development or emergence of more unified curricula?

### Possible Points of Intervention

Clearly, if schools are to have a coherent orientation leading to a unified preplanned or emergent curriculum, administrators must be selective in responding to mandates and pressure groups. Systemwide deliberation could focus on how to satisfy requirements, such as those for competency-based education or requests for more positive images of females and ethnic minorities, yet stay within the system's overall orientation. Involving many levels of educators—school board members, administrators, supervisors, and teachers—might facilitate understanding the orientation and the means of satisfying various demands.

In-service programs and committee work could assist teachers in dealing with day-to-day practicalities and encourage them to envision the total thrust of the program. Legislators and pressure groups who make requests must also be educated to keep the total program in mind.

### Future Research and Evaluation

Many studies are currently being done regarding how teachers plan their courses.<sup>4</sup> Further studies could illuminate the nature of the curriculum emerging as a result of that planning. What are the sources of the curriculum? What are its strengths and weaknesses? What is included and omitted? How can teachers develop an understanding of a school's intent? Studying legislative and school board decision making could provide insights into the character of the mandates and the nature of the decision-making process at those levels. Such studies could provide an understanding of points of intervention necessary for improving the process.

Whether the curriculum is highly preplanned or emergent, its incoherence is due to a variety of factors. These factors should be investigated by teachers who deal with practicalities, as well as by educational researchers whose views tend to be more theoretical. As a result, educators may better deal with the difficulties of a disjointed, quilt-like curriculum at both the theoretical and the practical levels. [E]

<sup>4</sup>For example, Christopher Clark and Robert Yinger of the Institute for Research on Teaching at Michigan State University, Gail McCutcheon and Dorene Ross of the University of Virginia, Greta Morene-Dersheimer in San Jose, California.



*Gail McCutcheon is Assistant Professor of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.*

Copyright © 1978 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.