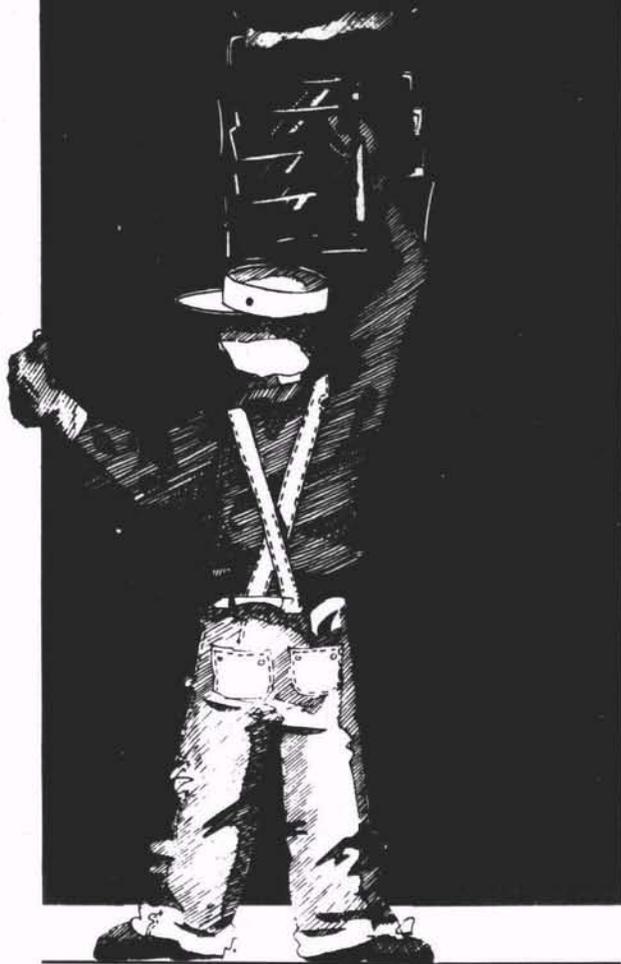


Window Dressing, Patchwork Quilt, or Working Document?

Roland S. Barth



Curriculum outlines prepared by each teacher are a little messy, but they're honest and useful.

Most school systems provide teachers with subject-by-subject curriculum guidelines that reflect what someone, sometime, felt children at a given grade level needed to know. Some guidelines are hopelessly out of date, some are current, some are so detailed they tell the teacher what color chalk to use. Others are broader, more general. Some are political documents to be waved at meetings in testimony that "we are teaching the basics;" others are workable outlines that teachers value and gladly use.

But whatever their quality, curriculum guidelines generate for a school system as many questions as they resolve. I have never seen a set of guidelines that told how to offer a uniform, prescribed curriculum for all children and at the same time respond to the diverse individual needs of teachers and pupils. Nevertheless, they serve a useful function. Good education requires careful planning. Good guidelines provide overall plans, while recognizing that much of what is taught and learned cannot be anticipated. They provide a framework, a coherent set of objectives, which ensures continuity of experience for students as they pass through the grades. Good guidelines help teachers and students to organize their experiences without dictating precisely what those experiences should be. Attempts to impose standardization beyond this level have only pedantic interest; in schools, complex and rigid guidelines meet with resistance, rejection, and mindless role-playing that undermine the educational efforts of most teachers and students.

Good guidelines are taken seriously by school people. Guidelines are good if teachers have participated in their development, if they include teachers' judgments about what can and should be taught, and if they incorporate teachers' knowledge of the ways children learn. In short, guidelines are good if they are realistic, reflecting the interests and capabilities of both children and teachers.

In one sense, all curriculum guidelines are obsolete the minute they are published, because most teachers continually adapt, refine, add, and omit as they teach. Good curriculum is growing, organic.

* Excerpted by permission of the publishers from *A School for Everyone* by Roland S. Barth (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, forthcoming in May 1980). © 1980 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Teachers follow guidelines as general statements of objectives, but as they follow them, they often supply their own materials, activities, and strategies. In the last analysis, then, the classroom teacher creates the curriculum.

Curriculum Outlines

With this realization, each June, I ask teachers to prepare their own curriculum outlines for the following year. These outlines help us to focus summer planning and to prepare our orders for books and supplies. I confer with teachers about their plans, offering assistance and occasionally intervening if a teacher's plans are too far out of line with the system's guidelines or at odds with those of the previous or subsequent teacher.

These curriculum outlines reflect both the system's curriculum goals and each teacher's personal philosophy and style. They embody what the system suggests should be taught and what teachers have learned about children at a particular grade level in a particular school. But unlike systemwide guidelines, teachers' curriculum outlines seldom mesh neatly with one another. Frequently, I put on "math lenses" and read 16 math curriculums—an impressive and sometimes unsettling experience. Teacher guidelines are visible, written expressions of the rich, diverse, and highly personalized programs we have fostered. But they don't form anything resembling a coherent blueprint for the elementary years. At best, they resemble a patchwork quilt; at worst, a random smorgasbord, hardly suitable for solemn presentation at a PTA or school committee meeting. They violate traditional expectations—a curriculum is supposed to be nice, neat, tight, uniform, and logical, ordered in scope and sequence. And they offer little compelling evidence that anyone is overseeing the school and looking after the continuity of children's experiences as they progress through the grades.

Why then do we continue the practice? Because our guidelines are pretty honest. What teachers say

they are doing is, by and large, what they are doing. We prefer messy reality to waving a system's syllabus and saying, "Here's what we're teaching," when the actual behavior of teachers is quite different (a discrepancy that contributes so much to educators' fear of being "found out"). Impeccable, unified curriculum outlines for a school or a system are often logically beautiful, but functionless. Our outlines have blemishes, but they are useful. They provide an important starting point for curriculum development and coordination. They reveal omissions or redundancies that can be corrected. They bring out disagreements that can be resolved or at least openly discussed. They are, in short, working and workable documents.

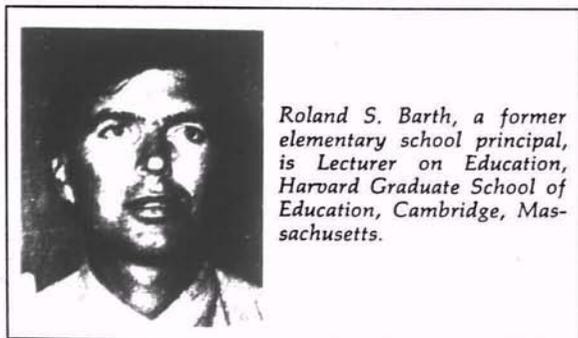
Worth It

Perhaps most importantly, our homemade curriculum guidelines shift the teachers' role. Teachers are expected to be actively creative, rather than passively compliant. In addition to responding to the system's uniform curriculum, they develop and implement their own, tailored to their strengths and the needs of their classrooms. While this produces both labor and risks for teachers, most gladly accept the accountability that accompanies writing their own curriculum outlines. With the costs comes a large measure of control over classroom instruction. To most teachers, it is well worth it.

I have found that when teachers prepare their own curriculum outlines crucial issues come to the surface, promoting examination of what teachers believe about themselves, about children, and about teaching. The teacher who deliberately decides what to do in the classroom, in light of many alternatives, is more likely to evolve a successful, consistent curriculum than the teacher who is given a canned package, even if the package is more neatly labeled. Function is sometimes more important than form.

In spite of our untidy methods, the roof has not collapsed. Each year curriculum outlines reveal substantial differences in educational values and instructional means among teachers. Children seem to learn and to enjoy learning, and most proceed through the school with little confusion or failure. The roof has not collapsed because teachers know what they are doing and why, and because they believe in their methods. When this is the case others are likely to accept and even respect their efforts, no matter how assorted and undignified they may appear on paper.

I have found problems of diversity in curriculum more exciting and productive than problems of uniformity. A teacher-initiated, personalized curriculum is always in the process of "becoming." With diversity, we have heated debates, thinking, growth,



Roland S. Barth, a former elementary school principal, is Lecturer on Education, Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

movement, and change. With an imposed uniform curriculum, what is there to discuss other than "do we have to do it?"

Can Children Adjust?

In a school characterized by varieties of teachers and diverse programs, visitors frequently ask, "Do children have problems adjusting from one teacher to the next, from one type of classroom to another, from one method of teaching to another?" Despite the patchwork quilt quality of our curriculum outlines, children do not seem to be confused. Our primary problem—and the primary problem of all elementary schools—is helping children make connections among ideas and people and between different elements of the curriculum.

I have found the most important factor in enhancing the quality of children's connections is the quality of connections among their teachers. If cooperative, frank interpersonal relationships exist within the staff, the right hand knows and cares what the left hand is doing, and what both hands do makes sense to children. Connections for children are made partially through articulated curriculum outlines, but the greatest continuity comes from adults related by bonds of respect, interdependence, trust, communica-

tion, and caring. Without these bonds, curriculum development is another rhetorical, futile exercise of form with little substance.

Our basic objective is to keep teachers in touch with one another and with themselves—to establish a basis for maximum staff satisfaction and development that leads to maximum caring about children. This is a crucial task. When a child has a nightmare about school, the dream seldom concerns whether desks are in rows or circles, whether the children use gerbils or workbooks, whether they learned to factor numbers by one method last year and a different method this year, or whether the reading book is from the same series. Only principals have nightmares about that sort of thing! Children's nightmares about school are dominated by the quality of their relationships with teachers and other children. If these relationships are characterized by ridicule, shame, punishment, or fear, children have nightmares. If these relationships are marked by helpfulness, support, and understanding, they usually do not. If the school can provide the latter qualities with consistency, scope, and sequence as children move from teacher to teacher, subject to subject, and grade to grade, we have done much of our job. At that point, our patchwork quilt provides not confusion but a protective cover for children in the school. *ET*

It's here! A brand new idea in math improvement for grades 7-9.

MATH Magazine from Scholastic is just off the presses and ready to help you with students in grades 7-9 who have difficulty with math.

Hundreds of math teachers and department heads who have pre-tested this magazine agree that it really does:

- Motivate hard-to-reach students
- Reinforce basic skills
- Help kids apply arithmetic processes to real-world situations
- Provide positive experiences in math for students and teachers alike.

Send for your **Free** sample copy today by using the coupon below.



RALLY:
A Trip Against the Clock

See how Scholastic MATH Magazine can mean new success in math for your students.

Mail to: Scholastic MATH Magazine
902 Sylvan Avenue • Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 07632

Name/Title _____

School _____

School Address _____

City/State _____ Zip _____

Printed in U.S.A.

Copyright © 1980 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.