Future Priorities for Curriculum Reform*

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Public education requires reforms not only in curriculum, but in the structure and political support of schools.

The consideration of future priorities for curriculum reform in American public schools presumes that American schools have a future and that if they do, curriculum reform is possible. I wish I were more optimistic than I am about either of these possibilities. From talking with teachers and administrators around the country, I feel that morale has never been lower.

Teachers are being blamed for being incompetent, and test performance is used as evidence. Resources for sabbaticals, workshops, and experimental programs have just about dried up in California, and the drought is extending to other parts of the country as well. State and local taxpayers are less willing to support public education, and private schools are being filled to capacity by the children of parents who seem to believe that the public schools can no longer do their job well. Teachers who have not had a cost of living increase in years are being asked to cope with mainstreaming, bilingual and bicultural education, competency testing, and prescriptive, district-wide curricula. Some of the best of the lot are leaving for better paying jobs in industry; some are choosing early retirement. Others, without the support of the community—and perhaps more importantly without its respect—stick it out, hoping that this, too, shall pass.

Whether we like it or not, this is the context in which future priorities for curriculum reform must be viewed. It is from this perspective we must talk about the goals of reform, the methods of achieving it, and the kinds of resources that will be needed for productive change.

Recapturing Meaning

A prime goal of curriculum reform must be to recapture meaning in education. In elementary school classrooms today, two characteristics are salient. First, the ditto machine works overtime to provide children with piecemeal tasks designed to develop what are euphemistically called "basic skills." The child's problem is to work his or her way through these dittoed materials so that when the child's worksheet is corrected and graded, the teacher can record the fact that another set of skills has been mastered. This unexciting approach makes it necessary to use extrinsic reward systems to motivate pupils. One classroom I visited awarded "goulash tickets," which allowed the child to do anything he or she wished for a 15-minute period. (Apparently goulash is equated with freedom.) In another classroom "Golden Rod Coupons"

*From a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 1979.

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were given for every five books read. These coupons were worth two minutes each and could be saved up so that upon presentation the child would be entitled to leave a few minutes early for lunch.

The reinstitution of meaning in education, or even the recognition of its importance, would help diminish the preoccupation with control and discipline that characterizes so many schools. Engaging in tasks in which one has a personal stake, from which one receives intrinsic satisfaction, and through which one learns is, I submit, not a bad aspiration for a process that claims the title of education.

Fewer Right Answers

A second goal I would emphasize for curriculum reform is related to the first. I believe we need educational programs that emphasize exploratory activity and analogic cognitive processes, and that regard cooperative activity as a virtue. The lion's share of what we teach in school is in a rule-governed mode. By a rule-governed mode I mean that virtually all writing, arithmetic, and reading in the school is taught as a matter of learning a known set of procedures that are to be applied to a known set of conditions, in order to arrive at a known set of answers. The pedagogical problem for a teacher who assigns spelling lessons or arithmetic problems is to produce child behavior in which all of the words are spelled identically correct and all of the arithmetic problems receive the same right answers. Such tasks are essentially rule-abiding. Both the teacher and the child can feel secure in knowing they can always look in the back of the book for the correct answer. The objective is an isomorphic relationship between the book's answer and the child's response. An inordinate amount of what goes on in schools, particularly in elementary school classrooms, is of this nature. The attitude implicitly fostered is that in school one of the major virtues is learning how to apply rules to problems one doesn't define for oneself, in order to arrive at correct answers that one does not care about.

Certainly we need programs in schools in which rule-governed fields receive their due—there is little virtue in imaginative spelling, for instance. But such fields should not so dominate the curriculum that they foster intellectually docile children or, eventually, adults who cannot abide the ambiguity of inconclusive answers like the ones that permeate our lives outside of school. In short, I believe we need curriculums that cultivate exploratory and analogic processes; that elicit the use of judgment and reason; that honor coherence and style; that teach the child that one is never too old to play; and that the playful treatment of ideas is one of humanity's most stunning capacities.

While such attitudes can be fostered in any field in the curriculum, there is one area in which such virtues are central: the arts. At a time in American education when they are among the first casualties of the budget crunch, they are the fields which, given the dominant climate of today's schools, children need the most.

It is in the arts—when they are well taught—that the child learns that *how* one says something cannot be separated from *what* one says. There is no "back of the book" where the correct answers can be found. In the arts the child must exercise that most difficult of human acts, the exercise of judgment; deciding when the painting is finished; the poem completed; the music well performed. It is the field in which uniqueness, originality, idiosyncracy is a potential virtue, not a potential vice. It is a field in which little things mean a lot, as the arts live by their subtleties. It is a field in which chance is eagerly sought and in which the joy of the ride is at least as important as arriving at the correct destination. If arithmetic, spelling, punctuation, grammar, and reading are rule-abiding activities, the arts may be regarded as structure-seeking activities. The forms of human rationality that they foster and prize are too often absent from the classrooms of America.

Places for Children Now— or Bootcamps For Tomorrow?

Finally, regarding goals, I believe we need curriculums that return childhood to children. It is the spontaneity, the immediacy, of life that makes it worth living. To enjoy it one must avoid being captured by the kind of goal-directed activity that dominates our thinking about education and successful educational practice. One thing about objectives is that they are continually out of reach. We seem relentlessly to teach the young that there is always some other place to be, some other goal to be accomplished, some distant objec-

tive to obtain. In the first grade it is the star or the goulash ticket. In graduate school it is the Ph.D. For assistant professors it is an associate professorship, and so it goes.

What about the quality of the present? Can we plan educational programs that honor the present? Can we provide educational environments that allow children to be children, or is it really necessary for career education to start at age six? How can we design school environments and plan educational programs that reflect our image of what people might become? How can we create places in which children can live their lives as children and not simply as future candidates for institutions of higher education? Must schools really be the boot camps of tomorrow?

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With respect to means, any effort to improve schools must recognize teachers as pivotal figures. For their role to be supportive, teachers must once more be able to take pride in their craft. They need to have some proprietary interest in what they do. They need to feel that their classrooms are shaped by their visions as well as by the visions of SRA (Science Research Associates) and Prentice-Hall, or by the often simplistic mandates that flow from the state capital. This means in practice that teachers must be given the opportunity, within the general guidelines of responsible educational policy, to decide what and how to teach. It does not mean that teachers have to design their own curriculum materials. Most are neither prepared to do so, nor want to. What teachers do want, and what they should have is the opportunity to plan with their colleagues, to feel free to innovate, and to explore new possibilities without facing severe sanctions.

In short, like the pupils they teach, teachers need the opportunity to grow. They also need the opportunity to deliberate with their peers and to work with a principal or a department head who supports such planning. Efforts to secure quality education by mandating standardized forms of curriculum or competency testing is as doomed to failure now as was the aspiration to design teacher-proof curriculum materials a decade ago. We need to exploit rather than stifle whatever ingenuity and excitement teachers are capable of generating. If such ingenuity and excitement cause problems for psychometric theory and practice, so much the worse for psychometrics. It is time we educators recognized which is the horse and which the cart.

Qualitative Evaluation

This leads me to the second point on my list of means for reform: our needs in the area of evaluation. There is no question that tests not only reflect our conception of what is important in education, but help create those conceptions as well. For all practical purposes testing is by far the major means through which we evaluate our educational achievements and failures. Tests radically bias our understanding of what children learn in schools; therefore, educational policy based mainly upon the data they provide is policy that is badly informed.

What we need is an approach to evaluation that is far more generous in conception and method than conventional achievement tests employ. If we are to change schools and alter curriculums, if we are to provide the kind of room for growth and exploration that children and teachers need, then we must have data that illuminates the virtues and vices of classroom life. When educationally important events occur that tests fail to measure, the public must have some way of knowing it. In short, we need to pay at least as much attention to how the game is being played as we now pay to the final score.

Not all of what is important for children in school, not everything that they can learn or experience can be expressed in numbers. The qualities of life and learning that are not measurable need to be suitably rendered in other forms. If we examine our culture-at-large, we will find many forms of representation besides numbers that can be used to portray educational practices and their consequences. The developments in this country and abroad in the use of qualitative methods for evaluation are, in my view, among the most significant developments that have taken place in education during the past decade. We are beginning to discover, at long last, that the arts of teaching and learning can be described and understood in subjective forms that are in harmony with the character of what they educate.[1]

[1] For a description of qualitative methods of evaluation see: Elliot W. Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1979), particularly chapters 11 and 12.

These new paradigms, however, are not yet in the schools. To the contrary, the nation's schools are marching to an entirely different drummer. Unless we succeed in breaking the stranglehold that ETS (Educational Testing Service) and other test manufacturers have upon our educational practices, I see scant hope in making significant changes in schools or significant reforms in curriculum. It is unreasonable to expect the public to subscribe to priorities that have little payoff within the system now in use.

Finally, with respect to means, we need to recognize something that the arts teach very well—namely, that form is content. For schools this means that their organizational structures have a major impact on what teachers believe they can do and what it is children are likely to learn. If we value productive idiosyncracy, we need to ask how schools can be organized to support its development. If we believe that not all school activities need to be instrumental in character, then we have to design schools in which other fulfilling aspects of life are also possible. If we believe that cooperation is as important as competitiveness, then our schools need to be places in which working together for common purposes can actually occur.

The Politics of Reform

What resources will be required to make such reform possible? In the first place let us recognize that the changes I have suggested will be difficult to achieve—some would say impossible. Let us also recognize that to bring about such changes will require a major political effort, one that simply will not occur by using a dissemination or showcase model of educational change. No school district will make changes that it believes might jeopardize its students' chances for success within the existing system. The criteria that structure the system must be changed to be compatible with values that people actually hold or can come to hold.

This will require the creation of political coalitions supported by people who themselves are outside of professional education. Citizens who are not professional educators are more politically credible regarding education than the professionals who work within it. Our arguments are regarded as self-serving. Citizens, however, can be guided and informed by professional educators. This requires students of education who are not simply competent technicians willing to perform any service that is paid for. It requires educational statesmen and stateswomen. The field of education in America today is badly in need of such leadership. Can graduate schools create wise educators as well as technically competent ones? I do not know whether this is possible, but I believe we must try.

I began by remarking that the topic "future priorities for curriculum reform" implies that the public schools have a future and that curriculum reform is possible. It may be that the public schools will survive the eviscerating conditions that beset them today. If they do, their value will depend on their ability to provide experiences to the young that are genuinely educational in character. EL

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