CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT SINCE 1900

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The locus of responsibility for curriculum development has changed considerably in the last 80 years. Prior to 1910, state education authorities prepared and approved lists of subjects to be taught in public elementary schools in their states. In some states, this responsibility was delegated to the education authority of the county, town, or city. At that time, the curriculum was viewed almost solely as the list of subjects and the sequence in which they were to be taught.

Elementary school subjects were divided into skills and content. It was believed that when students had mastered the skill subjects (reading, writing, and arithmetic), they had the tools to master the content subjects (geography and history).

Few differences were to be found in the lists of skill subjects prescribed by the various states. There were some differences in content subjects, because states usually required teaching the history and geography of their state, but otherwise the course of study didn't vary greatly.

When Thorndike reported his experiments, which clearly contradicted the notion that particular subjects disciplined students’ faculties—memory, imagination, and reasoning—and when Dewey wrote about his school in Chicago, where school learning activities were part of the student’s efforts to understand and deal with the larger world, educational leaders began to think of the curriculum as more than a list of school subjects.

Thorndike maintained that the elements learned in school must be identical with those in life outside the school in order for school learning to be transferred to the world outside. Dewey emphasized the need for continuity of experiences in school and out.

These seminal reports stimulated empirical curriculum studies of such matters as the arithmetic problems children and adults actually encounter in their daily lives, the vocabulary found in materials read by children, the situations in which children and youth have a need or opportunity to write, the reading interests of children, and the like.

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States, school districts, and schools have different responsibilities in the curriculum planning process.

Another series of curriculum studies emerged from the psychological investigations of reading, writing, and arithmetic. For example, when studies showed that readers did not build up word recognition from recognizing the letters, but recognized the word as a whole before they perceived the letters, a new reading series was produced based on initial word recognition.

From 1910 to 1930 the published courses of study issued by the states for public elementary schools changed very little except to add nature study as a content subject in the upper grades. But the actual curriculum—objectives, content, and learning experiences—changed markedly in those schools that adopted new textbooks and methods, and helped teachers learn to use them. This dependence on the local school was recognized by several city school administrators as early as 1921. In Denver and St. Louis, citywide curriculum development projects were undertaken at the elementary level. In both cities, the curriculum was changed to be more in line with children’s abilities and interests, and to include activities relevant to life in those cities. These changes could be made in the local curriculum without changing the state-mandated courses of study.

But it was found that continuity of the reforms required continued psychological support by the community, continuing in-service education, and instructional materials relevant to the new programs. Without these conditions, the curriculums lost much of their dynamic quality. When the administrators who had given leadership to curriculum development left Denver and St. Louis, active efforts waned and the new curriculums began to lose some of their reform features.

High School Curriculum

The early high school curriculum was determined not so much by state courses of study as by the views of college leaders about the subjects essential to preparation for college. A list of subjects prepared by the Committee of Ten in 1893 largely dominated the college preparatory program of American high schools until the 1930s.

By 1912, all states had established public high schools and, although at that time less than 10 percent of American youth were graduating from high school, the enrollment of young people not planning to go to college was increasing. These young people and their parents considered the prevailing high school curriculum unrelated to their goals. With support from farmers, labor groups, and employers, the Smith-Hughes Act was passed in 1917, authorizing federal funds for high school vocational programs. State boards of vocational education were made responsible for defining the curriculum for such programs, with the result that they were more tightly controlled by the state than most general education courses.

The great depression of the 1930s created a sense of crisis in American schools. Students were living in a world that had changed so much they didn’t understand what was happening or what they could do about it. High school graduates in large numbers were unable to find work and felt their schooling had not prepared them to be independent adults. Many educators began reexamining the curriculum, seeking to make significant reforms. The period from 1931 until 1942, when the United States got deeply involved in World War II, saw extensive curriculum development.

Noting that efforts by city school districts to construct new educational programs had not been followed by similar activity in states where the cities were located, two states, Kansas and Virginia, undertook statewide curriculum development projects. These involved reexamination of the entire curriculum, formation of a comprehensive set of scope and sequence guidelines, and experimentation with a variety of new kinds of learning experiences.

Because the projects in Denver and St. Louis had shown that teachers who participated actively in the planning of new programs were generally
able to use them as planned, while other teachers often were not, the procedures used in both Kansas and Virginia provided for wide-scale involvement of teachers. As these projects proceeded, the sheer magnitude of the effort proved far greater than anticipated. Available resources of leadership and time were inadequate, and eventually the projects were discontinued. However, they left a residue of ideas and guidelines that influenced teachers and administrators in many schools, not only in these states but in others.

The need for new educational programs in American high schools became more obvious as the depression deepened. Unemployment among youth was nearly 100 percent. High school enrollments doubled as young people, finding no jobs, stayed on in school. Generally, there were only two educational programs available: college preparatory and Smith-Hughes vocational. Most of the new students were not planning to enter college and they were not able to enroll in the vocational courses, which were quite selective. High schools were pressured to develop new curriculums.

Several large efforts were undertaken in response. The Eight-Year Study, sponsored by the Commission on Relation of School and College of the Progressive Education Association, was the first and probably best known. Others included the High School Study of the Southern Association, the High School Study of the Negro High School Association, and the Michigan Study of Secondary Schools. These projects proceeded it became clear that plans drawn up by central committees or by expert consultants were not being carried out by most teachers. Unless they believed in the programs, understood their roles, had the necessary knowledge and skills, and felt confident they could use the new programs successfully, teachers would not try them.

Leaders of the Eight-Year Study established summer workshops and weekend committee activities to provide opportunities for teachers to develop the necessary interest, understanding, skills, and materials.

The Eight-Year Study also found a need for intellectual resources on which teachers could draw. A Commission on the Secondary School Curriculum was established with subcommittees in all the major subject areas. These subcommittees, composed in each case of persons with special competence in the subject, explored possible contributions the subject could make to the development of young people in the light of current social conditions.

Furthermore, an intensive study was undertaken to furnish information about the interests, abilities, and needs of American youth and to encourage teachers to learn more about their own students. With these resources in ideas and data, and with opportunities for teachers to learn and produce resource units that became common property on which all teachers could draw, most of the schools participating in the project developed amazingly comprehensive curriculums.

Curriculum Development Shelved

With the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, the focus of curriculum development suddenly shifted. No longer were many youth unemployed. The nation's efforts were concentrated on winning the war and the schools were expected to do their part. This included helping young people understand the critical situation facing the nation and to support wartime measures taken by the government. More directly, schools were expected to provide preinduction training for the students who would be entering the military service, and to provide training for the war industries, both for regular students and for young adults. These new expectations resulted in the sheling of other curriculum development activities until after the war was over.

For a dozen years after 1946, schools responded to well-intended but naive pressures to change the curriculum so as to include the content viewed as important by different pressure groups. These included the world emphasis, air-age education, anticommmunism courses, global understanding, environmental education, free enterprise units, physical fitness courses, and the like. In some cases, funds were provided to support development of instructional materials, and some programs were funded to educate teachers in these areas. Most schools did not become actively involved, and none of the efforts seem to have had permanent effect. In those states where special programs were supported by statutory require-
did not understand or feel they had the skills to carry on inquiry learning. The content of the new books was being treated as material to be memorized rather than to stimulate.

Lessons Learned
What lessons can be drawn from the experience of American schools in the changing locus of responsibility for curriculum development? The most important is the recognition that, in our relatively decentralized educational system, different responsibilities can be met effectively at different levels of the system.

Schools exist to stimulate and guide the learning of students. Students, especially children, require the example, the encouragement, and the psychological support of other persons to carry on an extended series of learning efforts. Teaching is a human service, not a mechanical, routine activity. If curriculum change involves new goals and significantly new content, these goals must be considered desirable by those who chiefly influence the child’s learning, that is parents and teachers, and these persons must understand their roles and have the skills required to perform them.

In other words, the local school, where the children are, the teachers are, and the parents are, is an important locus of curriculum development. Most students are not reached by so-called “teacher-proof” instructional materials. Efforts to save time and energy through circumventing the active involvement of teachers are largely fruitless. And where children come from homes of uneducated parents, the failure to involve parents limits effectiveness of the curriculum.

However, schools can do only a limited amount of curriculum development without encouragement, support, and technical assistance. The education authority of the district bears responsibility for encouraging the local school, for helping to obtain necessary resources, and providing assistance.

The state can aid curriculum development by clarifying what the state and its public expect of schools in terms of major functions and comprehensive objectives, but not by specifying particular learnings at particular ages or stages, since these outcomes are not uniformly obtained at the same age or grade level. The state is also responsible for obtaining the resources for curriculum development. The time and effort required to develop significantly different educational programs have been greatly underestimated. Longer term planning is necessary, with appropriate allocation of resources.

It is also necessary to establish priorities for curriculum development, since not everything needed can be done at once. Focus first on critical problems in the local schools, since their solution will bring most evident improvement in the education of students in that school. Even though progress is slow, the projects should increase the competence and confidence of the teachers and parents in the local school that they can solve their problems. As time goes on, the impact of these programs will be wider and more significant.

The past 80 years have not always been periods of curriculum improvement, but they have furnished curriculum workers with greater understanding of the curriculum development process. I believe we can look ahead to increasing success in producing effective educational programs in our schools.