

# Which Way General Education?

Recent events in Canada and England show that the search for a common curriculum can lead to centralization and uniformity.

It may be cold comfort for American educators to know that their colleagues in Canada and Great Britain have been attempting to redefine general education over much of the past five or six years. Their efforts may provide some cautionary notes for others engaged in this enterprise.

## Great Britain

In Britain, where the debate is currently strongest, things were initiated, or at least stirred up, in 1977 by the then Prime Minister James Callaghan when he invited the country's educationalists to devise a core curriculum that would be acceptable both to the government and to teachers.<sup>1</sup> Since then much of the discussion has focused on the definitive 1981 Department of Education and Science statement, *The School Curriculum*. The main thrust of this latter document is the government's support for the notion that every pupil should experience a curriculum of broadly common character until the age of 16.

In a national system of education that is centrally supported and locally administered, the very idea that the government might have views about the curriculum is a problem. As might be expected, there has been widespread and varying reaction. Certainly, there are wide-ranging interpretations of what a core curriculum might be, with protagonists claiming their views on the issue are being distorted. In the search for conceptual clarity, much is being made of the difference between core, common, compulsory, and uniform curricula. *The School Curriculum* has been criticized for simply repeating what others have said better, lauded for provid-

ANDREW S. HUGHES



ing a strong sense of direction, and treated with bemused indifference by those who think it does not matter anyway since the resources necessary for implementing the policy will not be provided.

In proposing to offer each child "a broad program" that is "coherent and balanced," *The School Curriculum* is reacting against the unbalanced curricular experience of many British youngsters. But for many British educators it does not go far enough. Many claim that there is still too much emphasis on the knowledge-based curriculum and too little attention to such areas as creative and applied design, personal development, and life skills. According to one commentator, "the cosmetic surgery of this particular paper fails to hide a fundamental need for a reappraisal of the school curriculum" (Gyte, 1981). A broader perspective is provided in another 1981 document, *The Practical Curriculum*, published by the Schools Council; but in both there is an overwhelming fascination with issues of monitoring and assessment.

Letters to the *London Times Educational Supplement* have reflected on these documents by referring to "the

present government's known obsession with national standards and testing," and suggesting that "'national' needs are merely a pious assumption masking a holy unreasoned bid for centralization of control of curriculum." In spite of grave reservations and outright opposition on the part of many educational leaders, there is some sympathy among members of the teaching profession. Indeed, in a survey reported in 1979, more than three-quarters of secondary school teachers favored a common curriculum. What that common curriculum might be is less clear and the debate goes on.

## Canada

In Canada, too, there is a continuing if typically low-key debate on "the issue of core curriculum." At the national level, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) has shown considerable interest through its Curriculum Committee, which in 1979 produced a report entitled *Definitions, Assumptions, and Trends in Core Curriculum in the Provinces*. Unlike the British DES document, it is not an expression of policy; it is a background paper. Nevertheless, its very existence attests to the interest in the idea shared by political ministers and their senior advisors. Certainly, in the collective mind of CMEC, "core" represents a growing trend and might well "provide a basis of a more unified approach from province to province" (CMEC, p. 2).

The Canadian version of core is not in any way linked to the classic conception that emerged following the Eight Year Study, which was associated with the progressives in the 30s and 40s. There is no consideration here of free selection by teachers and students of issues considered to be personally and socially relevant. The Canadian conception is of a "core plus options"—a program in which some courses are mandatory and some are optional. The major trend is

Andrew S. Hughes is Assistant Director, Atlantic Institute of Education, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

"towards setting out more explicitly the minimum program requirements at the various grade or divisional levels throughout the school system" (CMEC, p. 6). The CMEC Committee points out that while the terminology is not used in all provinces, a core exists in all provinces whether in the form of a list of required subjects, basic knowledge or skills within a subject that students must study, or a list of goals that must be pursued.

Accompanying this increasing specification of what must be taught, and indeed, inextricably linked with it, has been a recentralization of curriculum decision-making authority. (Centralization within each province is the normal state of affairs in Canada.) This recentralization has resulted in the adoption of procedures that are increasingly complex, legalized, and bureaucratized. Indeed, there has emerged an ideology of "the firm hand." I have derived this expression from Thomas Wells, who in 1976 was Minister of Education for Ontario. He said, "We are going to take much firmer grip on what is actually being taught in the elementary and secondary schools of the Province" (Wells, 1976, p. 1). In the same month, his views were echoed by his British Columbia counterpart in a document entitled *What Should Our Children be Learning? Goals of the Core Curriculum*. He asserted that, "The citizens of this Province expect the Government to take a more positive role in defining what should be taught in our schools and in assessing the results of the teaching" (Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 1976). There can be no doubt that this "firm-hand ideology" is gaining more than a grip in all our provinces.

There are two particular concerns that have to be addressed in Canada. First, in being overly prescriptive, programs may become overly restrictive. Far from ensuring a broadly based coherent experience for students, we will, in fact, limit their curricular experience—especially if the idea of a core becomes too closely linked with back-to-the-basics thinking. Second, while current trends emphasize what is to be a minimum program, experience tells us that minimum programs have the uncanny knack of becoming maximum programs—especially when provincial funding is tied only to those aspects of curriculum that are mandated. (To be fair, however, I should add that both the objectives and the content in the minimum core pro-

grams are relatively broad.)

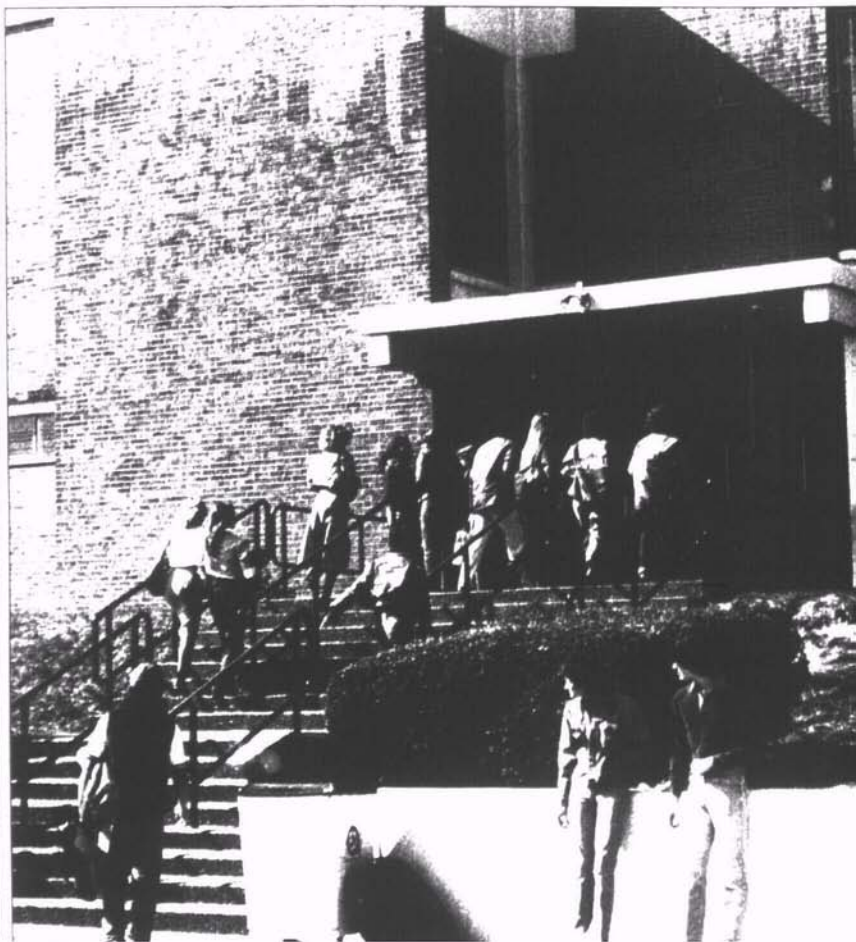
Dennis Lawton has described the situation in Britain as a kind of "transatlantic madness" based on minimum competency and crude accountability "allied to a Conservative educational philosophy stressing standards and selection" (1980, p. 81). The trend in Canada is toward the centralization of authority with a range of complex bureaucratic structures designed to monitor, measure, and control. There seem to be ever increasing opportunities to stifle initiative and there is an ever present danger that we will follow the path of least resistance to the creation of a uniform curriculum.

General education in the American tradition is associated with themes of liberation and emancipation that focus on a broadening and deepening of perspective. But for many neo-general educationalists, the concept seems to do with cutting back and leveling down, with restricting and limiting opportuni-

ties, with closing off avenues rather than opening new vistas.

Thus, for American educators the debate on general education will afford an opportunity for critical self-reflection. It can be a time for reaffirming the liberal principle of general education and ensuring both breadth and depth in the curriculum. Or, it can be a time when the tradition is usurped and, in the name of general education, liberal learning is banished from the American high school. Your neighbors watch with more than a little interest. ■

<sup>1</sup>While the language of debate varies from the United States to Canada to Great Britain, and, indeed, usage within any one country is by no means consistent, the notions of general education, core curriculum, common core, and common curriculum are closely linked. For example, Tanner (1981) talks of "a core of studies . . . known as *general education*."



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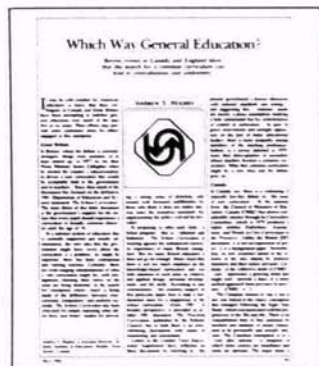
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# Lessons from America: A Response to Hughes

American educators need not look to the other side of the Atlantic or to our neighbor to the north for cautionary or directional signs in the struggle for general education. The battle signs are clearly marked right here at home at every turn of the American educational experience. Witness the wave of educational retrenchment that gave us the narrow-minded, reductionist, "back-to-basics," skill-drill catechism. Witness the call of the late 1960s for "relevance," and "humanizing" the schools through vague prescriptions for student-centered pedagogy and *au courant* curricular cosmetics. Witness the discipline-centered reforms of the 1950s and 1960s that gave us the "new" math and puristic knowledge specialism at the expense of knowledge application—not to mention the curriculum imbalance as a result of Cold War priorities. Witness the "back-to-basics" syndrome of the early 1950s—a response to the tax conservatives of that era.

Over the early decades of the 20th century, progressive educators recognized the limits of a curriculum geared merely to basic literacy for the masses and a liberal education for the privileged. They conceived of general education as the means of providing the populace with the capability of broaching crucial societal problems and issues through reflective thinking for social power and insight. Many curriculum patterns for general education evolved in school and college, reflecting differences in educational philosophy and social commitment. But the movement was unmistakably evident, and a rich literature on general education emerged.

The contemporary scene is marked by a growing recognition of the failure of the basics as the guarantor trinity for an educated populace. Hence it is not likely that American educators and educational-policy makers will confuse general education with basic education.



The present danger is that we will not seek to benefit from our rich heritage in general education, that the schools will continue to succumb to the retrenchment syndrome (reflecting the wider social-policy situation), and that the colleges will regard general education as their own exclusive province while seeing the schools as properly limited to a curriculum focused on preparatory studies for the college bound and basic literacy for the masses.

The growing concern for general education in Britain came after a long and hard struggle to eliminate the class-divided dual system of secondary schooling in favor of the unitary comprehensive school model. However, the Thatcher government would prefer to have the clock turned back to the divided system where the "working" class would be limited primarily to the trinity of basics. As far as extended educational opportunity is concerned, the British tradition has held that "more means worse." The American tradition holds that "more means better." This is one of the lessons that our British and Canadian cousins might learn from America.

—DANIEL TANNER



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