Resolution on Critical Contemporary Issues

Issues such as nuclear disarmament, environmental protection, population growth, world hunger, and human rights concern every inhabitant of our planet. Each of us is responsible individually for expressing concern and for being active in ensuring that our global future is desirable. ASCD also has a responsibility as an organization to express the beliefs and concerns of the membership and to support members’ rights to this expression. ASCD should address itself to determining and expressing the views of its members on critical contemporary issues. These views should be publicized and used as the basis for ASCD activities that address these issues.

—Adopted by the ASCD Board of Directors at Anaheim, California, on March 22, 1982.

Social Issues: Dare Educators Take Positions?

ALEX MOLNAR

There is good reason to believe that everyone alive today experiences the consequences of humankind’s social decisions on a scale without historic precedent. At enormous expense governments of at least two countries maintain the capacity to destroy our species in a nuclear holocaust. Rain water, fouled by the industrial wastes of one country, destroys wildlife in another. Each day untold numbers of people die of hunger while food surpluses pile up in enormous warehouses in North America and Western Europe. In the United States we are asked to believe that a whole array of responsibilities once considered public (from garbage collection to the education of our young) are in fact private.

Against this backdrop what children learn in school is of great consequence. Shall, for example, children learn math from lessons based on the destructive force of nuclear bombs, biology by studying the impact of acid rain, economics by attempting to figure out why many children in the U.S. are hungry and many in the world are starving, social studies by studying the transportation system in Los Angeles County before and after the involvement of General Motors, and civics by joining the junior ROTC? Or shall we assert that such subject matter, while appropriate for civic debate, is not appropriate in public schools? Where do educators begin as they try to formulate a position for themselves to guide educational policy?

Perhaps a good place to begin is 1932 when the U.S. was in the throes of a severe depression and George Counts posed his famous question: “Dare the schools build a new social order?” In so doing he helped set boundaries for a debate over the proper relationship between school and society. At one end of the continuum are the so-called social reconstructionists who argue that schools can be used to change society. Proponents of the first position have argued that school curriculum should enable students to acquire and master the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to reconstruct society in a more just way. At the other end are those who hold that schools can only reflect society. Proponents of the first position have argued that social change is society’s business and that the task of schools is to educate students who will use their ideologically-neutral knowledge and skills to whatever purpose they wish as citizens. The majority of educators seem to place themselves rather uneasily in the middle, accepting neither position fully, yet unable to formulate clearly preferable alternatives.

In the mid-1960s atmosphere of widespread public dissatisfaction with schools, educators engaged in widespread curricular experimentation. Two general and competing schools of thought emerged. One held that many children did not succeed academically because they were culturally deficient. Curriculum was seen, therefore, as a compensating mechanism for social factors that placed students at a disadvantage academically (Mack, 1978). The other school of thought held that school performance could not be improved appreciably unless curricular reform was linked to social change. The other school of thought held that school performance could not be improved appreciably unless curricular reform was linked to social change. Adherents argued that unless curricular reform was accompanied by social change the schools could only perpetuate social inequality (Rist, 1970; Baratz and Baratz, 1970). Proponents of each position usually agreed tacitly on two propositions: (1) the relationship between social fac-

Alex Molnar is Associate Professor, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
tors and school performance was significant and (2) success in school was central to success in life. The general consensus seems to have been that schools had a role to play in social transformation and the search for “relevant” curriculum was carried forward vigorously.

By 1972 there was far less support for the assumption that success in school necessarily led to success in life (Jencks and others, 1972; de Lone, 1979). A good deal of research began to suggest that schools could be effective in spite of sociocultural factors and that the proper business of schools was competent teaching in well-defined academic areas, with the life chances of graduates left to other social institutions (Lawton, 1975; Brookover and others, 1978; Rutter and others, 1979). This work is regarded by many educators as optimistic in that it suggests schools can teach students effectively and that, if properly organized, they will not be overwhelmed by external social factors such as race, class, and so on. It takes a more limited view of the role of school than the work done in the 60s and early 70s.

Current school effectiveness literature brings us full circle. Counts grounded his original question in the assumption that schools have the potential to actively shape society. Current work concerns the potential of schools to withstand the consequences produced by sociocultural patterns.

Perhaps it is time to step outside the circle.

The relationship between school and society now appears much more complicated than the schools-shape/society/schools-reflect-society dichotomy. Evidence seems to suggest that curricular content and process, singly and in relation, both shape and are shaped by sociocultural factors (Bernstein, 1975; Ogbu, 1978; Apple, 1979; Lundgren, 1979). These findings lend credence to Macdonald’s contention that the study of curriculum is the study of what should constitute a world for children, inequality and the limits of social reform. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979.


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