

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?

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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, eco-

nomics 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. At the other end are those who hold that schools can only reflect 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. Proponents of the second 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. 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-

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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 learning and how to go about making that world. As such it is, in *microcosm*, [concerned with] the very questions that seem to me to be of foremost concern to all of humanity (Macdonald, 1977).

This contention brings us unavoidably to treatment of social issues as content in school curriculum.

The place of social issues in the curriculum is a broader concern than the proper criteria for a "controversial issues" unit in social studies class. Nor is

this concern addressed by references to the "let all sides speak" ideology found in so many official pronouncements about social issues in the curriculum. Schools do not let all sides speak. They never have. Ask teachers if it is possible to teach using whatever content they know to be true and germane to what they are teaching and many will tell you that it is not possible. This circumstance, of course, contributes to the difficulty of helping students learn how to construct a world.

With certain knowledge ruled outside the bounds of legitimacy, educators have proceeded with curriculum development as if the casting of some knowledge as illegitimate did not truly matter because what was learned in school was somehow value free. Taking this tack has allowed the profession to maintain that knowledge acquired and skills mastered in school enable students to use what they have learned for their own purposes without any predisposition to use it in a particular way. Despite this soothing logic, in practice few educators would argue seriously that there are no values in the content of the curriculum or that content values are unimportant. Therefore, it is probably accurate to say that concern about using social issues that may be controversial as curricular content is actually a concern that "community" values are being transgressed. "Community" values mean for the most part (though not always) the values of the local and/or national power structure. It is, for example, unquestionably easier for most teachers to use environmental education materials from McDonalds or consumer education materials from J. C. Penney than economic education materials from the Union of Radical Political Economists. The near certainty that explicitly using social issues as curricular content will cause conflict illuminates a general agreement that the content used as a matrix to teach *anything* does *itself* teach.

It may well be that educators will have to explicitly acknowledge, as Henry (1963) has pointed out, that the tension between school and society is inevitable. However, this tension need not be feared and it need not be papered over. Instead it can be regarded as a constructive aspect of school-society relations, helping each to change. Posing the problem this way enables educators to move beyond the narrow concept of school-society relations that Counts' question presupposes.

The consideration of "social issues"

can be used self-consciously to help reveal and bring understanding of points of consensus and tension between schools and their various social constituencies. Such understanding is necessary if social issues are to be considered as a referent for curriculum organization. Perhaps, a starting point is for educators to debate the principal issues facing humankind today, our position on these issues, and the implications of our position for school curriculum. EL

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