

# Curriculum History and Educational Leadership

*The curriculum field is suffering from a serious case of ahistoricism and wasting one of our most valuable resources: experience.*

LAUREL N. TANNER

*We do not merely have to repeat the past. We use our past experiences to construct new and better ones in the future.*

—John Dewey

Dewey's counsel, made in 1920, is disquietingly appropriate for educators today. The curriculum field keeps recycling old educational models and treating them as new. It fails to learn from the past and consequently repeats its failures. Cyclical fads cause the profession to lose ground (Cremin, 1973) when its greatest need is to benefit from its own vast store of thinking and experience.

Many of us can remember educational history because we were there. "Back-to-basics" was the most-heard-about movement in elementary and secondary education in the 1950s. Then, as now, its advocates implied that schools had lessened their commitment to the fundamentals and must emphasize patriotism and extensive work in the three Rs.<sup>1</sup> The Council for Basic Education, founded in 1956 to confine education to "basic subjects," recommended that social studies, which frequently takes a "problems approach" to learning and crosses several disciplines instead of just one, be replaced by drill and memory

work in single subjects or courses. This was "a time-tested method for inculcating in the young symbols and facts which must be part of the natural furnishing of the mind before it can solve any problems" (Smith, 1966). Today, social studies is once again a scapegoat of the back-to-basics movement (Shannon, 1975).

The point, however, is that the present push toward basics is being treated by many who are involved in curriculum development as something that never happened before. Not only has there already been a back-to-basics movement, but it has been proven a false step. We know this because of the "do your own thing" counterreaction in the 1960s.

Why do we get a funny feeling when we read the proposals of the National Commission on Excellence in Education for reforming science education? Because we have read them, and experienced them before. "Science education" was the educational buzzword in the United States Congress from 1945 to 1960. This led to the birth of the Na-

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Hinshaw Mann School, 1963. Courtesy of Teachers College

tional Science Foundation in 1950, and the creation of major science curriculum projects of a national scope in the late 1950s. Concern for meeting the Soviet competition in space led to the National Defense Education Act of 1958, providing aid for science and mathematics, with the addition of foreign language instruction.

Today the competitor is Japan and the problem is cars, not Sputniks. The National Commission on Excellence in Education has called upon university scientists to "upgrade" the science curriculum "as they did in the post-Sputnik era." The implication is that all went well with those reforms, but did it? What was our experience of a quarter-century ago?

Scientists who were engaged in curriculum making sought to shape the student to their own image, and thus create more scientists. But despite the expensive reforms and efforts to persuade youth to embark on scientific careers, enrollments in physics plummeted throughout the 1960s. Among those turning away from physics were our most gifted students. The curriculum, which emphasized basic science at the expense of applied science, and did not allow for humane reflections and interpretations, was identified by scientists and curriculum specialists as a factor in the problem of falling enrollments

in physics. Now, in 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education is unaware that the policy that they are recommending (and recalling with nostalgia) probably created the very problems they are trying to solve. It led to a decline of student interest in science the last time around, and there is no reason to believe that it would affect them differently now. To ignore our experience and retrace our false steps is to court almost certain waste and disaster. But this has been the pattern in curriculum development since midcentury.

Reading about the reform efforts of the early progressives can be equally dismaying. One must, for example, confront the fact that contingency contracting, or "contracting" with pupils to do their work, is a reinvention of the Dalton Plan developed by Helen Parkhurst in 1913. As might be expected, the division of the curriculum into contract jobs presents the same theoretical difficulties now as it did then. To mention just one, not all of the functions of the school can be met mechanically. This problem and others were aired in the educational literature a half century ago.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, those who reinvented the Dalton Plan did not search the literature for previous experiences with contracts. Instead, they approached their task as though the world did not exist before their own curriculum reform efforts.

### Curriculum History: What Is It?

Curriculum history is the cumulative experience of the curriculum field. For the purposes of this discussion, let us consider curriculum history as *historical products* and *historical processes*. Historical products are the body of research, evaluation, and conceptualization that contemporary workers can and should draw upon in improving curricula. These products (facts and principles) can guide the practical work of schools.

As Dewey (1929) and Gage (1978) pointed out, the fund of knowledge in the field is not a closed system. As the scientific method is applied to problems of the field, portions of that fund may be discarded in favor of findings demonstrated to be more valid. Curriculum history need not be out of the depth of the past; it's history if it happened only yesterday. The research and theory in our field is nothing more or less than the living presence of history—some recent, some not so recent.

The ideas of educational reformers of

the past continue to have great relevance in our work today. Dewey, for example, looked upon curriculum and methods as the chief means for the realization of equal opportunity in a democratic society, on which the growth of individuals and a better future society depend. Dewey defined equal opportunity as shared knowledge, interests, and concerns among the members of a society. Schools that, for whatever reason, prescribe one curriculum for poor children and another for privileged youngsters violate that principle of equal opportunity. Educators ought, rather, to use the curriculum to break down the barriers of race and class and to liberate individuals' capacities (Dewey, 1916). This principle is a historical product.

Another example of historical product is the principle that those who are expected to put new curricula into operation should participate in identifying and solving curriculum problems. This principle was formulated in the progressive education era, and was strongly reinforced by the experience of the Ford Foundation's Comprehensive School Improvement Program and other similar experiences with "teacher proof" curricula in the 1960s (Tanner and Tanner, 1980).

Yet a third illustration, of a different order, is the finding that third-grade teachers (and presumably others) who want to improve achievement in reading should move around the classroom a great deal, communicating their interest in pupils' progress and attending to their academic needs (Gage, 1978). Gage tested the significance of the combined results of studies on teaching and showed that certain teacher behaviors correlate positively with pupil achievement. This is a marked departure from earlier reviews of studies of teaching that found new consistent relationships. It illustrates very clearly that the facts supervisors use in their work do indeed change as the scientific method is applied to problems of teaching.

Historical processes are the experiences of educators in developing professional knowledge and in changing the curriculum. Such records do exist but are apt to be neglected. An example is the set of reports published in 1942 on the Eight Year Study.<sup>3</sup> The problem with which the study is concerned—the development of a curriculum and instructional program designed to be useful to adolescents—is still with us, and is, in fact, one of the most persistent problems of education. There is much

to be learned from reading the reports of that experiment. Another illustration is *Curriculum Improvement in Public School Systems* (Caswell and others, 1950) in which the activists who were involved describe reform in Denver and other cities. Look through a half century of *The Elementary School Journal* or any other periodical for practitioners' accounts of curriculum change in their classrooms or schools; they are not common.<sup>4</sup>

Descriptions of curriculum reform in any era vary enormously in their usefulness. Many of the authors were unclear about their educational objectives, and some schools, such as Caroline Pratt's Play School of the early progressive era, were "experimental" in name only. According to one author, the child must "work with entire freedom. No criticism is ever made by the teachers" (Winsor, 1973, p. 33). These writings are useful only if they are seen as ominous warnings. Child-centered education has already been tried and abandoned twice in this century.

This brings us to perhaps the most important historical insight. The three fundamental factors in curriculum development are the learner, society, and organized subject matter. Any curriculum reform that attempts to pit one factor against the others is doomed to fail. An examination of recent curriculum movements is instructive. (It should also be noted that the curricular past, particularly the progressive education movement, has become legendary. Indeed, for the nostalgic, it seems to belong to a better age than ours. But prescriptions fashioned to fit this notion can lead only to repetition of the past and its mistakes.)

There have been many valuable experiences in curriculum development, which teachers have failed to write about. The experiences of many teachers who followed the Deweyan ideal of encouraging children to identify problems of interest to them and of importance to their community died with them. If teachers and supervisors are to make positive contributions for others to draw upon and build on, they must record their own experiences in curriculum improvement.

Granted that the ability to build on past experience is one criterion of a profession, a sense of responsibility is another (Greenwood, 1966). To deal with the problem of ahistoricism, educators must view it as part of the larger problem of professionalism, which is

fundamentally one of educational leadership.

### Leadership from the University

In 1969, Bellack wrote of curriculum professors' growing awareness of ahistoricism. Awareness was not enough, however, it needed to be translated into course offerings in curriculum history. As the years have passed, these courses have been implemented at a number of universities (including Teachers College, Columbia University, where such a course emerged directly from Bellack's efforts).

If the curriculum field is to deal with the problem of ahistoricism, leadership must come from the universities. Professors of curriculum and their doctoral students must undertake research in curriculum history. And curriculum history must be included in programs preparing curriculum workers as well as curriculum researchers. Such courses should be constructive and functional. The question underlying the study of specific reform movements comes straight from Dewey (1920): What does our "old experience" tell us about "developing a new and improved experience"?

### Leadership from the School

Schools must accept the primary responsibility for countering educational cycles and fashions. Scholars can teach and write about a "new" idea that has been tried and discarded (although many professors are, unfortunately, bandwagon hoppers themselves), but school administrators have to deal with the board and community pressure to adopt it. What makes the situation of the school especially difficult is that educational cycles are often influenced by wider sociopolitical forces. The contemporary retrenchment in the curriculum, for example, has been influenced by political and philosophical retrenchment in the larger society. Nevertheless, I am convinced that administrators and teachers can deal with ahistoricism when they see the possibilities. Two major principles are involved.

First, any discussion of a "new" educational model or program should take advocates beyond the "we want it" stage to a consideration of the problem it was meant to solve. Every innovation was originally developed to solve a problem, which may not be your school's problem at all. In fact, by adopting someone else's solution, you may create new problems of your own. If this happens,

you can be certain that the next era of reform in your district will be an attempt to undo the excesses of this one.

Perhaps the most striking example may be found in our inner-city elementary school classrooms. In 1969, the Ford Foundation sought to transplant certain features of reform in British primary schools in American inner-city schools (Tanner and Tanner, 1970). The main feature of the open classroom imported from Britain was lack of structure. Children were free to select their own learning activities, and learning was supposed to be largely self-directed. In Britain, this model was created as a means of providing greater freedom for children from highly structured and rigid working-class homes. Not surprisingly, when the open classroom was transplanted into American inner-city schools, the results were disappointing, if not disastrous. The children these schools served had a great deal of freedom outside the school and needed a sense of direction. Little wonder that the schools soon tried to reform the "reform" with a new excess. Both movements, do-your-own-thing and back-to-basics, ran counter to the body of research in the curriculum field. Schools must probe the background of an innovation in order to prevent expensive failures and to move ahead in desirable directions.

Second, curriculum reform efforts should not be mere reactions to the excesses of a preceding era of reform, but should begin as an attempt to solve a problem. One starts with the problem, not the innovation or model. In working on a problem, we must see what happened before. (Most problems, like most proposals, are not new.) Our strength lies in our experience. Our misfortune lies in our failure to use it. □

<sup>1</sup>See Arthur Bestor, *The Restoration of Learning* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1955), and C. Winfield Scott and Clyde M. Hill, *Public Education Under Criticism* (New York: Spectrum Books, 1955).

<sup>2</sup>See Allison Cornish, "The Contract Plan in Retrospect," *School and Society* 34 (July 18, 1931): 95-97; and Clay J. Daggart and Florence A. Petersen, "A Survey of Popular Plans for Instruction," *Educational Administration and Supervision* 18 (October 1932): 499-522.

<sup>3</sup>Entitled *Adventure in American Education*, the series was published by McGraw-Hill Book Company. See Wilford M. Aikin, *The Story of the Eight-Year Study*; H. H. Giles and others, *Exploring the Curriculum*; Eugene R. Smith and others, *Appraising and Recording Student Progress*; Dean

Chamberlain and others, *Did They Succeed in College?*; and *Thirty Schools Tell Their Story* (participating schools provide an account of their involvement in the experiment, which assessed progressive methods at the secondary level and ran from 1932 to 1940).

<sup>4</sup>An excellent sourcebook for accounts of curriculum reform in the progressive education era, however, is Lawrence A. Cremin's classic, *The Transformation of the School* (1961).

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