

Curriculum Improvement: Who Participates?

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WHO should participate in improving the curriculum? To the modern democratic educator, the answer does not seem to be difficult. All who are affected should participate. Parents and other members of the the public, teachers and administrators, children and youth. So it seems that our question is answered.

But if the answer is as easy as this, why isn't the curriculum everywhere throughout the nation improved through the participation of all affected? What should be done everywhere seems clear enough. Follow the principles of good group process. Have everybody in for study and agreement. Carry out the mandate of all. Selah!--the result is curriculum change supported by every one.

This happens mostly in Fairyland. Why?

Successful group work is a difficult business. Many group members have difficulty in accepting and even more difficulty in living by the basic principles of group process. Stuart Chase summarized these principles well in *Roads to Agreement*. Successful agreement involves genuine participation with everyone getting into the act. It involves the release of group energy into constructive channels. It involves clear communication among all and a mutual understanding of semantics and logical traps. It involves willingness to consider the facts first, as in the scientific method, despite thirst for theoretical controversy. It involves the participants feeling secure while afloat on the risky seas of group consideration.

The people who must come to accept and live by such principles, if agreement is to be achieved, come from highly varied economic, social, religious, and political backgrounds in an age of anxiety and in a culture in conflict. They perceive each other quite differently. Their personality patterns are deeply set.

Impossible, then, to achieve roads to agreement? Not at all. As American folk-say puts it, in this country the impossible just takes a little longer to achieve. Not impossible. But not easy either. Not to be exorcised by the voodooism of a single sociodrama at the opening of a conference, useful as sociodrama is.

If all who are affected should take part, everyone in the school community should be in on the improvement program, Here's a tough one too. Everyone is quite a few people, even in Crossroads, U.S.A., as well as in a Los Angeles or New York City area surrounding a school. If we settle, for representatives, there is a problem of proper balance among groups. If we settle for samples, there is a problem of achieving a fair sample. Granted that fair representation can be achieved, many who are affected will be left out. Without personal participation in planning, they may feel uninvolved and may regard their representation as merely nominal.

But assume we can get fair representation in planning sessions and, through ingenuity in reporting back and through use of instruments, some involvement of many others in a more distant and less personal relationship. Assume planning sessions; use group processes skillfully. Many agreements and shared actions will result. But agreement by all on everything is unlikely in as diverse a society as America.

Should total agreement be insisted upon as a prerequisite to action? Though the democratic and peaceable Quakers answer yes, some students of group action, fear that the price of total agreement may be too high. The price may be long periods of inaction while the disagreement waits in the freezer, cooling off. Or the disagreement may be irreconcilable, as a democrat's difference in ideology from the authoritarianism called communism. Or the price may be obfuscation of real differences, specious agreement on generalities, with "operators" then free to interpret supposed consensus as they will. Therefore some regard total agreement as strictly for the totalitarians.

The knottiest problem of all may be the proper responsibilities and relationships of those who make up "all who are affected." Specifically, what are the responsibilities and relationships of the professionals and the public? Who decides what? Discussion of this is usually between those who compare education to medicine and those who say that education should follow public mandates.

Those who use the medical analogy argue that educators, like doctors, must diagnose and treat rather than have laymen prescribe, else what avail the careful training and practical experience of the specialist? Those who urge following popular mandates say that since the schools belong to the people, educators should assume leadership yet always recognize that decision-making in education, all the way from broad policy-making to decisions on technical details of teaching, such as phonics, belongs to the people. This latter position usually includes a democratic faith that the people will study the facts, will support full and free inquiry, and will judge well.

But another dimension should enter this discussion of responsibilities and relationships of the professionals and the public. The attempts to capture man's mind through capturing his children's schools never cease. Suppose the people of community X--not a minority but whatever you usually mean when you say the people--decide to reject free inquiry. Suppose the people of community X want indoctrination of a set of not-to-be-examined but claimed to-be-good answers on certain economic, social, religious, or political issues. Yet the educators in school leadership positions in community X believe that there can be no freedom without freedom of the mind and consequently support the method of intelligence. The people of community X reject freedom of inquiry.

The educational leadership of community X regards freedom of inquiry as fundamental. What, then, is the modern democratic educator's highest loyalty? What should a man do? (Or, reversing the question, suppose the educational leadership of community X, not the people, rejects free inquiry and sponsors some claimed-to-be-good impositions?) . . .

The easy answer, "All who are affected should participate," remains valid. but it doesn't answer some related problems.

Educational Leadership, 1954