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# Muddy Curriculum Waters

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*Louis Rubin*

Observers of schooling have long wondered why it is that the curriculum has, for so long, been subject to its periodic undulations. Seemingly, people of reasonable intellect should be able to prescribe a sensible course of study which students pursue. Yet, over the decades eminent theorists—Dewey, Counts, Brameld, Rugg, Kilpatrick, Bode, Tyler—and others, have continually argued contradictory points of view, as well as divergent postulations as to the instructional processes and substantive knowledge of greatest importance to students.

The explanation lies both in ideological variation, and the fact that philosophical convictions regarding the context of teaching and learning are, in practice, always subject to social exigencies. Positivism, as an illustration, stems from the belief that reliable knowledge is based upon verified fact. Phenomenology, on the other hand, assumes that “codified knowledge” arises out of prior meaning that is pre-ideational (Pinar, 1988). In short, empirical conclusions have legitimacy only when bolstered by substantiated evidence. Curriculum practice, moreover, involves ideological, technical, and operational elements (English, 1983). The notion of “outcome-based education,” for example, assumes that a unified body of cultural concepts can be identified and taught, that these concepts can reflect common values which serve public expectation, and that the conceptions and values can be organized into a coherent framework and encapsulated into a delivery system that is both productive and efficient. Theorists like Bobbitt, Rugg, Tyler, and B. O. Smith have long embraced such a *positivistic* approach to curriculum. Their critics, in contrast, contend that the approach is based upon a fraudulent tradition which permits schools to avoid genuine emancipation, as well as to sustain and preserve a social system which is unjust and flawed.

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Seeking to identify specific commonalities within these contrasting points of view, Vallance (1983) identified six summarizing generalizations:

1. "The field of curriculum practice is broad and embraces all those whose work allows them to influence the content, form, and impact of learning programs."
2. "Curriculum practitioners operate within a set of regular and identifiable constraints which shape their decisions and their actions."
3. "The school curriculum cannot be considered outside the total context of the family, community, work roles, and other educative forces that shape a child."
4. "These are nonschool curricula equally needing systematic attention."
5. "Every practitioner involved in curriculum development faces a fairly regular set of decision points involving easily identifiable groups: deliberations with state boards, legislatures, district administrators, building principals, parents, teachers, and students."
6. "There is a commonly accepted orderly sequence to be followed in constructing a curriculum."

Contemporary illustrations of these six constraints come readily to mind: With respect to the multiple sources of external influence, for example, one need only recall the goals espoused by the National Governors Association, and the diverse opinions and beliefs advanced by E. D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, Albert Shanker, William Bennett, the President and Mrs. Clinton, and a broad assortment of sundry newspaper columnists. Within the profession itself, in addition, lie the recommendations of teacher and administrator organizations; implications for practice advanced by scholars working in the areas of cultural diversity, cognitive development, and bilingualism; and the various remedies proposed for coping with at-risk youth.

In the arena of social constrictions, one has only to recall the difficulties Diane Ravitch encountered in trying to persuade Congress about her list of essential priorities; the ongoing sequence of budget reductions; the endless disputes among vested-interest groups regarding the curricular legitimacy of instruction aimed at advancing self-esteem; the pros and cons of the all-year school; the tugs-of-war surrounding the issues of vouchers and choice; and, most recently, the entry of proprietary, for-profit, organizations such as Whittle Communications, Education Alternatives, and the assorted groups involved in Charter schools.

With respect to the relative advantages and disadvantages of peripheral educational forces, curriculum theorists long have acknowledged that all children are exposed to an external curriculum outside the

classroom walls. Parents serve as the child's first teachers, and continue, for a time, to have impact, although in progressively diminishing degree. Their ability to sustain reasonable attentiveness to homework assignments and the extent to which they facilitate the broader dimensions of learning, through constructive exposure to the culture, also plays a significant role. The predispositions shaped by television, both good and bad, are well-documented, as is the tendency for large numbers of youth to moonlight for 15-20 hours a week—in addition to their schooling. And, beyond these things, lie the value-shaping affects stemming from movies, video cassettes, and popular music.

Although the problem is of a somewhat different stripe, it is also worth noting, in this connection, the toll taken by the diminished virtue attached to education and the declining classroom work ethic. In a recent New York Times article, Shanker (1993) quoted a teacher's commentary on his students:

Most of them gladly accept less for their tuition money, as when a lecture is cancelled. Many of them complain when more is offered to them for the same price—as when a course is enriched with additional lectures or experiments. This is understandable behavior, and all of us acted that way as students. But no one acts that way when having one's car fixed by a mechanic.

He then adds that

. . . voucher supporters are correct in saying that competition would force schools to be sensitive to what customers want, but what most kids—and most adults—want is not to have to work very hard. In the free market of colleges and universities, students are more inclined to seek easy courses than excellent ones. Why wouldn't market forces do the same thing in public elementary and secondary schools?

As for the fourth commonality, business and industrial leaders repeatedly have argued, of late, that we cannot keep pace with our international competitors until the schools instill the foundational knowledge mandated by high-tech work modes. Thurow (1992), as an illustration, notes that

To create the productivity that can justify high wages, American K-12 education will have to improve. Numerous studies have sharply defined the problem. The performance of American high school graduates may have declined, it depends upon exactly how performance is measured. But the real problem is not deterioration. The rest of the world is simply reaching levels of performance far above those

ever reached in the United States. This is especially true if one looks at performance standards for the bottom half of the distribution. Even in the good old days, America wasn't very good at the bottom. Blacks that are today left uneducated in America's central cities were yesterday left uneducated in its rural south . . . local governments don't want to pay for first-class schools. They know that less than half the population has children in school at any one time, that students will leave home and use their skills in different geographic regions of the country, and that the high taxes necessary to pay for good schools would drive industry away. Firms would locate next door and free ride on their well-educated work force. (p. 167)

When the demands of business-industry are added to those of groups pressing for greater multilingualism; a more generous representation of minority students' native cultures; an increased emphasis upon math, science, history, and geography; and a shift to grading systems which do not harm students' self-concepts, one begins to perceive the magnitude of the variant expectations with which curriculum designers must cope.

#### Vested Interests

Societal expectations of schooling, while far from uniform, generally embody substantive knowledge, values which nurture worthy citizenship, the ability to reason, and a sense of individual worth. In the aftermath of E. D. Hirsch's litany of cultural literacy, William Bennett's conceptions of proper instruction, and similar narrow-minded proclamations, minority groups increasingly have protested the scant attention given to the cultures and histories of citizens beyond the pale of the dominant majority. As a result, demands for an instructional program reflecting cultural diversity—popularly labeled multicultural education—have arisen.

Clearly, the existing curriculum is something less than eclectic. History texts, it has been said, tend to slight everyone but white males. It can scarcely be denied, moreover, that there is a pervasive obligation to enhance all students' understanding of the various cultural identities comprising American society. There are, however, a number of problems—racial, pedagogical, and moral—which create entanglements.

For one thing, curricular space is limited and in order to insert something new it usually is necessary to delete something old. Over the past 5 years, a good number of states have substantially increased the attention given to non-European cultures. Similarly, more than one institu-

tion has been confronted with the possible need to eliminate Plato or Shakespeare so as to create space for the undeniably valuable literary contributions of women and ethnic minorities. But, at the same time, the treatment of American history has been sharply truncated. Moreover, as Schlesinger (1992) has argued, in protecting, celebrating, and perpetuating ethnic identities we could well undermine the already fragile bonds to national cohesion. Separatism can breed injustice, intensify differences, and spawn antagonisms. Not only is race currently assuming stepped-up social and political significance, but ethnic divisiveness threatens to unleash new dangers. With the onset of fresh indications of racial polarization, the politics of color could well outdistance the quest for societal harmony.

Much of the difference may lie in the adversarial mentality stemming from confusion over language and intent. There is, for example, compelling evidence that minority children often are more subordinated than their counterparts, that children's feelings of self-worth affect their learning achievement, that the social milieu of schools may induce a damaged sense of identity, and that the classroom which affirms and respects is more sanitive than the one which rejects. It is equally reasonable to assume, however, that mindless "ethnic cheerleading," based on counterfeit contentions not only does minority children little good, but wastes precious educational opportunity as well. Conversely, when coherent multicultural content is pursued rationally and used to convey significant constructs, it can add materially to the intellectual vitality of instruction.

A second long-standing and troublesome issue concerns curricular distortion. Researchers have long documented the tendency of schooling, in virtually all nations, to contort historical fact—either through sins of omission or commission—in order to perpetuate national identity and chauvinism. The school's responsibility to socialize, champion patriotism, and inculcate pride in motherland has often been taken as legitimate cause to ignore whatever is deleterious, and, worse, to fabricate self-serving misrepresentations. Our own myth of George Washington and the cherry tree, the Russian penchant for erasing and rewriting history, and the Japanese willingness to correct their history books so as to abate Korean anger, all serve as examples.

Whether in the same or a somewhat more aggressive spirit, Leonard Jeffries (cited in Schlesinger, 1992) of the City College of New York suggested in a 1989 *Task Force Report on Minorities: Equity and Excellence* that Europeans were materialistic "ice people" who lived in caves and were responsible for the three Ds—"dominance, destruction, and

death." Similarly, Asa Hillard (cited in Schlesinger, 1992), in the narration for a slide show entitled "Free Your Mind, Return to the Source: The African Origin of Civilization" contended that

Africa is the mother of Western civilization; that Egypt was a black African country; that Africans discovered carbon steel and birth control, and brought the arts, science and medicine to Europe; that Beethoven and Browning were Afro-European; and that Africans, not Columbus, first discovered America.

Several more troublesome issues, thus, arise: First, is it really possible for students to pursue a separate identity and at the same time be a part of the whole? Second, is there a contradiction between urging the young to be themselves, while also joining the larger spectrum? And, third, is there an abiding peril that desirable multicultural education may carry the hazardous side-effects of curricular fragmentation and disjunction?

Janet Hale-Benson (cited in Nieto, 1992), as an illustration, has suggested that black children learn more successfully in schools based on African cultural norms. She argues, consequently, that ideology, method, and content must change if instruction is to be more meaningful to African-American children. Her call, among other things, is for the use of Afrocentric language and communication devices, and for the explicit use of students' dialects and speech idioms to facilitate learning, honor language diversity, and perpetuate positive attitudes toward schooling. The point in question is not the validity of these arguments *per se*, but rather the potential teaching complications. Would, for example, Puerto Ricans, Vietnamese, and Latinos, qualify for similar entitlements?

While the limitations of a monocultural curriculum are self-evident, finding a manageable and serviceable approach to multiculturalism is no easy task. School districts across the nation—caught in a maelstrom of countervailing arguments—are turning to the research community for counsel. Many dispute the assumption that the curriculum should assimilate students from disparate cultural backgrounds. Others think it naive to view cultural affirmation as nothing more than the celebration of difference, and to assume that multiculturalism will defuse racism. And some persist in the belief that roots can be transplanted, and—given the right stirring—the melting pot can be made to work. Finally, there are the corollary debates regarding pedagogy. Teaching methodology, multiculturalists frequently argue, is as important as the teaching content. The concept of critical pedagogy, frequently invoked in the deliberations, implies, in Cummins (1989) words, that "transmission models" cannot work because they ignore student experience. It is not simply a matter of replacing "old" truth with "new." Rather, it is a

process of reflecting on different perspectives and, through critical analysis, separating ideals from reality and “what is” from “what should be.” Those opposed, however, are chary about substituting students’ personal views and biases for documented historical fact. More importantly, perhaps, pedagogical interactions between students and teachers affect not only acquired knowledge and insight, but personal perceptions of identity as well.

### Disparate Expectations

In view of this contrariety, it is hardly surprising that educators themselves often are divided as to the matters of greatest importance. Not only are the views of teachers frequently at odds with those of their administrators, but parents vary in their conception of what makes for useful education. The convictions of a district board of education may clash with those of the state board, and superintendents, understandably, are prone to focus upon an educational agenda that is likely to encounter the least opposition. Consequently, more often than not curricular decisions take a mid-course between competing wishes.

The sixth generalization, relating to orderly sequence, attests to the increasingly convoluted pattern of curriculum development. What was once a somewhat patterned process of identifying ends and then systematically connecting them with congruent means, has now been interrupted by an avalanche of recommendations and impositions from multiple sources: President Bush’s Goals for the Year 2000, sustained for the most part by President Clinton; new standards for the teaching of mathematics set forth by the National Council; multicultural approaches to the social studies curriculum, devised in California and New York, then adapted or adopted by a number of other states; calls for authentic assessment, portfolio and otherwise; “Break the Mold Schools,” fostered by the New American Schools Development Corporation (NASDC); a spate of initiatives developed by individual districts and schools—the “New Vision” schools in New York City, the “Focus on Youth Program” in Los Angeles, Colorado’s Mountain Open School, and the Training Academy for Educators, launched in Cincinnati (DuVall, 1993). The spirit of these new ventures is captured, perhaps, in an article by George Leonard (1992):

We must summon the courage to recognize that the present system is entirely inadequate to our present educational needs. We must move as swiftly as possible to end it. We must empower our educators to create interactive learning environments rather than merely pre-

senting information to passive students. We must shift our national educational goals from improving school as it is to building something beyond it—call it metaschool.

Viewed in the large, then, it is clearly apparent that much of the ambiguity in curriculum design is a compromise between disparate expectations, competing demands, contradictory conceptions of weakness, and discrepant solutions. It is important to observe, moreover, that changes in one aspect of schooling invariably impact upon other factors in the formula. Hence, in an effort to promote badly needed cohesion, the Education Commission of the States recently urged policymakers to establish a “systemic” approach to reform. The problem, however, is that systematic overhaul is heavily dependent upon a consensus as to what is most needed. Unfortunately, such a consensus does not yet seem to exist.

Much of what some regard as a lack of evolution in curriculum’s theoretical base is attributable to the fickleness of policymakers’ convictions. As Cuban (1993) has pointed out, convictions are subject to endless vacillation. During President Nixon’s tenure, for example, the conventional Washington belief was, first, that individual perseverance and social exposure would adequately counter the limitations of mediocre schooling and, second, that more spending on education would not necessarily improve its quality. The shortsightedness of the policy notwithstanding, practitioners had no choice but to comply since it reduced funding. Cuban further notes that the more enlightened districts opted to ignore this myopic point of view and initiate programs which seemed sensible. “All courses of study, classroom materials (including text), test, and staff evaluations were aligned with the school board’s instructional goals. School plans and accountability were stressed.” The consequence, of course, was that test scores improved, the achievement disparity between white and minority students was reduced, and community pride in its schools increased.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, moreover, a groundswell of interest in the concept of the effective school emerged. Further spurred by the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), considerable attention was devoted to intelligent curriculum implementation—utilizing sound theory, in a rational context, in ways which guaranteed organizational cohesion, efficient instruction, and well-conceived evaluation. At the same time, a new set of arguments took on high currency: The economy and international competitiveness were, in one way or another, linked to the nation’s inept schools. Good education, thus, was connected not

merely to the preparation of youth for worthy citizenship and productive adulthood, but with the national economic health as well.

In the ensuing efforts to unravel the various threads of the problem, three significant insights emerged: First, good curriculum constructs, used unintelligently, produce little good and, often, considerable harm; second, piecemeal, willy-nilly, efforts to reform and restructure have a short life as well as limited utility; and third, escalating interstate population migration, combined with a rising immigration flow, made it plain that the whole was perceptibly weakened by liabilities in the parts, and in the absence of centric governance, some provision for better coalescence and conjunction was essential. Hence, policymakers concluded that, in Cuban's words, "central guidance must be given to a fragmented, decentralized system of schooling. Incentives and penalties were needed to motivate students and teachers to work harder." The current call for "systemic reform" is, in large measure, an outgrowth of these convictions. The term is imprecise and its meaning tends to vary with the bias of the interpreter, but generally, it signals a need to remedy discontinuity, eliminate separatism, and mount an integrated thrust toward primary goals. Broadly conceived, authentic systemic reform will necessitate: (a) achieving national consensus on a body of specified learning objectives; (b) defining these objectives in terms of specific knowledge and performance capabilities to be acquired; (c) obtaining general agreement as to what constitutes adequate achievement; (d) developing legitimate tests which equitably evaluate student competence; (e) designing instructional materials aimed squarely at the designated objectives, and appropriate to the evaluation measures; (f) developing effective training programs which familiarize teachers with the instructional materials and optimal instructional procedures; and (g) organizing a series of check points which insure overall quality control. Even optimistically speaking, the required time frame will be a decade or more.

### Reform Deterrences

Currently, while clearly a wake-up call has been sounded, the early steps have focused on three primary goals: (a) aligning major policies so that content, texts, tests, and teacher professional development are congruent; (b) introducing more intellectually and demanding content wherein learners—under teacher guidance—are required to both construct, and progressively reconstruct, personal meaning and knowledge utilization; and (c) eliminating excessive policies which inhibit teachers

and administrators from autonomous self-direction. Progress in this regard has been uneven. A smattering of teachers, here and there, caught up in the legitimacy and logic of the intended reform, are heavily committed. Others, either out of disinterest or ennui, remain detached and disinterested. And some, highly motivated at the outset, gradually have returned to their older patterns. Similarly, although the newer texts reflect a conspicuous shift toward cognitively oriented teaching, most instruction remains dominated by teacher talk and a didactic approach.

Viewed as a whole, systematic reform to date seems anything but systematic. Long-standing organizational trappings are not easily altered, points of resistance evolve in unexpected places, and, of greatest moment, since one change invariably necessitates a corresponding adaptation, a lengthy period of continuous adjustment and readjustment is inevitable. The complex structure of school systems, furthermore, makes them particularly vulnerable to such inconsistency. In addition, state policies tend to lose impact as they are filtered through bureaucratic layers. Teachers, who in the last analysis control their classrooms, are likely to screen recommended changes through the mesh of their own convictions, and most practitioners lean toward partial acceptance rather than complete endorsement.

From a political standpoint, many teachers find reform a high-risk venture. Not only must they give up old ways for new—familiarizing themselves with contemporary procedures, and adopting different patterns of intent—but the incompatibility stemming from unsynchronized changes in the system can be upsetting. Presently, for example, teachers are being urged to cover more subject matter with deeper penetration, and enable their students (a) to assimilate and utilize information and knowledge with greater facility, and (b) to perform effectively on tests as well. Most teachers, however, are convinced that the more traditional pedagogy is likely to engender higher test scores than that advocated in the reforms. There is an abiding fear, in addition, that in the push for accountability their reputation and stature will, more and more, depend on student achievement. Worse, they sense that the obstacles ahead are likely to be severe: Parents and administrators have growing expectations with respect to student control; the new pedagogy differs substantially from that in which they were trained and are accustomed; the American educational system is considerably less precise than that of many European nations, and the social value placed upon rigorous academic endeavor has continuously declined (Cohen, 1993).

What all of this suggests, self-evidently, is that systemic reform faces major deterrents which will not easily be overcome through new policy. An ancient adage holds that, in the last analysis, the curriculum

is whatever the individual teacher does once the classroom door is closed. Put another way, rational policy, good texts, and a plenitude of effective instructional aids all come to naught in the hands of an incompetent practitioner. Yet another major problem, then, lies in our approach to teacher professional development, which leaves much to be desired.

Classrooms are the dominion of teachers and as a result students generally tailor their behavior to the situation in which they find themselves. They try, logically, to accommodate their own agenda within the game rules set by the teacher. Students who learn their nouns and pronouns do so not always because they consider such knowledge valuable, but rather because the learning will bring them teacher-given rewards they covet. The reverse side of the coin is somewhat parallel: Children who fail do so not because they want to be losers, but because they are unable to win under the rules which are established. What all this suggests, obviously, is that healthy interaction between teacher and child is often a matter of chance. But when the psychological needs or intellectual values of teacher and child conflict, the probability of failure is high. When, on the other hand, their respective intents are reasonably congruent, the likelihood that each will find the classroom satisfying is greatly increased.

We need to recognize, then, that in implementing reform we cannot avoid the effects of either the teacher's personality or educational convictions. Not only are teachers autonomous and engaged in a craft that is highly ambiguous, but they also expect that empowerment implies some control of both their role and workstyle. Teachers' behavior, thus, is conditioned by personal belief and governed to a large extent by their own desires, views, and self-interests. Teachers, in a word, are human. Plainly, therefore, the quality of the learning which occurs is influenced both by the teacher's performance and the curriculum's merit. And, in turn, teaching performance is directed by ideological conviction.

It is for precisely this reason that no educational reform is failure-proof. To capitalize on human sensitivity and judgment, we must also risk human subjectivity. All of us have personal agendas which we seek to accommodate. The tired teacher, out of physical need, takes a leaden approach and omits portions of the lesson. The insecure teacher, out of self-doubt, is at times overpermissive. The dedicated teacher, out of strong belief, bends the curriculum in accordance with personal belief. And every teacher, upon occasion, finds such disparate needs in conflict with one another. Put bluntly, it is necessary to judge curriculum reform through the prism of real-world functionality.

### Teacher Autonomy

Philosophers have long posited that proper human action ought rightly to vary according to circumstance and situation. Because the motives underlying behavior are individually determined, psychologists fault the efforts of social scientists to devise a general theory of human action. As we engage life, we not only make private moral determinations, but like the student in school, we base our tactics on the conditions which prevail. So it is, seemingly, in teaching. There is no way to avoid either the benefits or liabilities of free human action. Clearly, we should enable teachers to deepen their perceptions, increase their awareness, perfect skills, and sharpen their sense of purpose. All of these, however, do not constitute a universal prescription for teaching. Just as the physician must qualify the use of a drug, even within the range of standard practice, because it may not be appropriate for a particular individual, so must we make allowances for exceptions to standard practice in teaching and curriculum.

The downfall of much of the recent reform effort and the muddying of curricular waters have, in large measure, been a consequence of faulty innovative process. Lesson plans, courses of study, standards and assessment, and policies are literally at the mercy of the teacher. At best they are means to an end. If they are to be useful, the teacher must like them, value their utility, and master the intricacies of their use. Thus the teacher is the indispensable agent of curriculum reform.

As the school improvement movement continues, and as we begin to draw increasingly on educational technology, the teacher's role as interpreter is likely to take on even greater importance. Since, at long last, we seem to have accepted the notion that children learn in idiosyncratic ways, there now is a heavy press to make alternate instructional procedures available. As prerogatives and autonomy increase, however, teachers will be required to make a greater rather than a lesser number of decisions about the classrooms they manage. The personalization of learning, the tailoring of methods and materials to the individual student, the incorporation of multicultural perspectives, the enhancement of equity, and the use of portfolio assessments all call for judgments that are particularly delicate and sensitive. Similarly, teachers' access to a larger assortment of diagnostic instruments will extend their power to influence curriculum. And, to push the point a step further, it is likely that one of the blessings of forthcoming technology will lie in its capacity to make teaching more precise. Hopefully, as the new systems are refined, the dangers of instructional redundancy, insufficient conceptual readiness, and weak cognitive schema will be reduced sharply. The

teacher's role as a curricular agent, and jurisdiction over the learning situation, however, will grow correspondingly.

It is noteworthy in this regard that recent speculations on the effects of regulatory controls, embedded in various reform proposals, have centered increasingly on the trade-offs between prescriptive and inspirational teaching. Rowan (1991), for example, has observed that

It is questionable whether the routinization of teaching would be an improvement over the current situation. In this reform, restructured schools would develop along mechanistic lines, which would reduce teacher satisfaction and might discourage the academically committed from staying in teaching. Increased input, output, and behavior controls would substantially reduce teacher autonomy and centralization of planning would place responsibility for the pursuit of rational knowledge about teaching in the hands of administrative elites and knowledge workers. . . . A control strategy based on a vision of teaching as a routine technology seems consistent with much of the rhetoric of the effective schools movement, which endorses the direct instruction model of teaching and advocates a mechanistic form of school management that includes frequent monitoring of instructional outcomes and close supervision of teaching. While this model has many supporters, a number of educators and policymakers have come to realize that this routine and mechanistic system of management may be inappropriate given the diversity of students and educational goals that characterizes American education.

Many of the problems alluded to earlier—the intents of state and federal policymakers, rising insistence on students as workers, the pros and cons of outcome-based education, and the obstacles to systemic reform—crest in the heightening disputes over monitoring school accountability. House Democrats, in deliberations over the proposed introduction of a congressional school-reform bill, rebelled over establishing minimal national standards for student achievement without, at the same time, ensuring that “school delivery” and reasonable student opportunity to learn were guaranteed. Reduced to its essence, the issue involves the relative responsibility of schools and students in achieving stipulated levels of educational attainment.

#### “Standards of Practice”

The National Governors Association and similar groups have, for some time, explored various ways to certify acceptable standards for

schools, as well as a defensible means to judge their performance. Opponents contend that a national curriculum and national assessment will have little utility if schools do not provide the wherewithal for students to accomplish expected learning. While it is difficult to quarrel with the assumption that mandating a rigorous curriculum, and high-stakes tests to confirm achievement, would be unconscionable without also insuring quality instruction that would enable students to succeed, several significant problems exist.

For one thing, many fear that delineating a compulsory national curriculum together with corresponding tests, and also specifying what constitutes acceptable instructional materials, adequate instruction, and respectable teaching facilities would homogenize instructional content, inhibit local control, impair teacher autonomy, and create an impossible grid-lock. For another, it would be naïve to assume that equal opportunity will result in equal achievement. It is not opportunity alone, obviously, but rather what students do with the opportunity. Moreover, pinpointing the exact causes of learning failure would be exceedingly difficult and hazardous. In a given classroom situation, for example, students often compensate for imprecise teaching by expending a bit more effort and grasping the points at hand on their own. In other situations, conversely, when learners encounter difficulty in understanding what is being presented, teachers often solve the problem by careful repetition, incorporating additional illustrations, or using a different approach. If, through greater persistence, either student or teacher can overcome learning impediments, where should responsibility lie?

Clearly, policymakers recognize that it is not just what is taught, but also how well—one kind of teaching may be better for some students than others. Many highly regarded teachers believe that when things are made too easy for students to understand, they fail to develop their own intellectual abilities; furthermore, in a class of 30, when 25 learn from the teacher's instruction and 5 do not, who is at fault?

Inasmuch as teaching is part craft, part science, and part art, yet another difficulty lies in attempting to specify exactly what goes into good instruction. Whatever can be taught, self-evidently, can be taught in different ways. This being the case, is it justifiable to dictate the exact dimensions of excellent teaching in all situations? What works for one teacher often does not work for another and, similarly, what is useful with one student frequently is useless with another.

In an effort to specifically identify "standards of practice" for schools, a number of researchers have focused upon instructional artifacts—textbooks, student assignments, examinations, teacher manuals, and

the like. Others have concentrated on such things as “equitable access to resources”; defensible curriculum and pedagogy; and course offerings, staffing patterns, instructional equipment, and so on. Here, the endeavor would seem to run counter to the much-discussed illogic of confusing inputs with outputs. In short, the fact that a school has (a) an excellent library, (b) a teaching staff with substantial postgraduate training, (c) an outstanding complement of computers, and (d) the best textbooks available cannot legitimately be taken as evidence that good teaching and learning go on. Put another way, it is entirely conceivable that in a poorly-equipped school, with old texts and somewhat obsolete computers, good teaching and learning may still occur. In South Carolina, a state task force, attacking the problem from a different vantage point, is seeking to use Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award criteria as a basis for assessing the effectiveness of schools’ instructional delivery systems. And, in New York, a “school-quality review” is attempting to evaluate school capability and performance through “inspections,” modeled after a British procedure wherein external teams of reviewers monitor a given school’s attempt to improve its practice.

For all of these problems, however, one can scarcely deny that there is abundant sense in efforts to increase students’ work commitment and instructional equity. In this regard it would be better, seemingly, to press for betterment in both arenas rather than to bet on one or the other. Plainly, the essence of the policy, and the attendant checks and balances, is to spur improvements, not to impede them. Still, the proposed corrective may create its own stumbling blocks.

One additional development further blurring the curricular waters, is perhaps also worth mentioning. As a consequence of long-standing concern, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (S.A.T.) dealing with writing, verbal, and math skills was not tied to the high school curriculum, as were subject-matter achievement tests. The S.A.T. has now been renamed S.A.T. I and the College Board Achievements are now referred to as S.A.T. II. The major distinction is that S.A.T. I is essentially an aptitude whereas S.A.T. II is an achievement test. The inherent difficulty is that aptitude tests do not reflect the extent of high school learning. Achievement tests do. Hence, placing dominant emphasis on the S.A.T. II—evaluating subject-matter knowledge—would serve to spur greater effort and learning among students. As Kirst and Rowen (1993) point out,

A recent study by Jonathan Baron and M. Frank Norman, “S.A.T.s, Achievement Tests, and High School Class Rank, as Predictors of College Performance” (*Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 1992), compares the predictive value of various combinations of the S.A.T.s,

high school class rank, and achievement tests. They found that once high school rank and achievement-test scores are known, the S.A.T.s add little to the prediction of academic performance. (The main analysis did not incorporate underrepresented minorities, but a supplementary analysis showed that this finding applies also to them.) The authors conclude that "use of achievement tests and high school class rank for college admissions could provide high school students with incentives to achieve academically, but the S.A.T.s are not designed to provide such incentive."

Subsequently, Kirsten and Rowen (1993) note that

Perhaps the most legitimate concern is that poor quality curricula in some schools would hurt the chances of bright but poorly prepared students. Again, changing the criteria for admissions—along with the movement for national standards—would increase incentives for inadequate high schools to improve their curricula. To give these schools time to get ready and to give an adequate "heads up" to students, there should be adequate notice of the impending change, say four years.

Waters, curricular and otherwise, sometimes become muddy. But with rational analysis and prudent action, they can be filtered.

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