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Who Decides What Schools Teach?

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# Who Decides What Schools Teach?

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*America desperately needs serious discussion of the condition of our schools and of the content and form of school programs, Mr. Eisner maintains. If curriculum scholars could significantly deepen this dialogue, they could make an important contribution to the culture at large.*

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BY ELLIOT W. EISNER



Illustration by Susan Hunsberger

**I**T IRKS those of us who have devoted our professional lives to the study of curriculum to find that, when efforts are made to improve the schools, we are the least likely to be consulted. Why doesn't the public appreciate our expertise? Why aren't we pursued by the national commissions that shape education policy, by state boards of education, by foundations eager to make U.S. schools "competitive" with those in other nations? Why are we left on the sidelines, commenting on the recommendations others make, rather than making recommendations ourselves?

In some ways the answers to the foregoing questions are not particularly subtle or complex, and I have no intention of making them so. In the first place, curriculum scholars — by which I mean those educationists whose specialty is the *broad aims and content* of schooling (as contrasted with subject-matter specialists in math, fine arts, science, and other such fields) — have not had much appetite for addressing the content of school programs. When they have had something to say, it has tended to be an attack on the way capitalism exploits students and teachers, or it has been addressed to those who already occupy the choir: namely, other educationists rather than the American public. Those Marxist and Neo-Marxist critics who have lambasted American schools can cite chapter and verse concerning what they think is wrong with our schools. But they have comparatively little to say about what is right with them or about how to go about making them better. They are adept at

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No matter how well something is taught, if it is not worth teaching, it's not worth teaching well.

pulling weeds, but rather inept at planting flowers.

For those of a more centrist bent, the overall mission of schools — and of what should be taught in them — has been largely absent from the intellectual agenda. The symposium from which the articles in this special section of the *Kappan* have been adapted was put together in desperation by an astute program chair who recognized that curriculum scholars in the American Educational Research Association were addressing everything except the most central of educational questions: What should be taught in schools? The papers delivered at that symposium and now published in the *Kappan* were created because of her initiative, not that of the writers.

One might reasonably ask, Why this neglect? How is it that broad, central questions pertaining to the aims and content of schooling should be marginalized in discourse on the curriculum? One reason is that such questions are not simply broad, they are unabashedly normative in character. In an age when discourse analysis, hermeneutics, feminism, and Foucault bombard us from one direction and a view of specialized scientific inquiry that regards only value-neutral description as cognitively respectable assails us from the other, the appetite for broad, “messy,” normative questions that hark back to Herbert Spencer’s “What knowledge is of most worth?” seems a touch too romantic. Intellectual respectability leads us in other directions. The result is that in academic circles we find a preponderance of papers that offer interpretations of interpretations or present highly specialized studies of individual disciplines that neglect central issues entirely. Both approaches avoid the broad-

er question of what is worth learning anyway.

Furthermore, many curriculum scholars have, in this day of research on teaching, shifted their focus from curriculum to matters of teaching and teacher education. Both are no doubt important areas of research, but they cannot replace attention to curricular matters. No matter how well something is taught, if it is not worth teaching, it's not worth teaching well.

Thus within the academy there is 1) a neglect of the broad aims and overall content of school programs, because of the growing interest in social criticism writ large and because of the difficulty of doing scientifically respectable work on issues that are scientifically intractable, and 2) a growing interest in teaching and teacher education that has shifted attention away from what should be taught. We appear to want better messengers more than better messages.

There are some exceptions to the picture I have just painted. For example, John Goodlad, a curriculum scholar par excellence, has not been quiet about what schools should teach. In *A Place Called School*, Goodlad not only identifies the strengths and weaknesses of schooling, but also identifies and justifies what should be taught there.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, within the academy, TheodoreSizer has offered Americans a view of curricula and a conception of the proper mission of schools that is built on a “less is more” principle.<sup>2</sup> Sizer argues that the compromises that teachers make in order to survive could be ameliorated if schools attempted less but did it better.

From outside the academy, Ernest Boyer's *High School* provides an articulate conception of what is worth students' attention and what schools would be well-advised to address.<sup>3</sup> And there is Mortimer Adler who, in his eighties, has much to say about curriculum and the forms of teaching that really count.<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that Goodlad, Sizer, and Adler have not only written books that are widely read and say something about what should be taught in schools, but they have also created organizations to build the kinds of schools they envision.

As noteworthy as these efforts to improve schooling in America have been, they are, alas, but minor themes within the larger score that is American education; more factors are at work to stabilize schools than to change them. What con-

fers such stability on schools? Why do they appear so intractable? What will be necessary to change them? And what role, if any, can those who have studied schooling and curriculum best play in reforming the schools? It is to these questions that I now turn.

#### STABILITY AND CHANGE IN SCHOOLS

When I was a student at John Marshall High School in Chicago some 40 years ago, I was enrolled in a curriculum that consisted of four years of English, two years of math, three years of social studies, two years of science, two years of foreign language (Spanish), one year of music, four years of physical education, and four years of art.

The school day was divided into nine 45-minute periods. We had about five minutes to move from one class to another. There were between 30 and 35 students in each of my classes, except in choral music and in gym, in which there were about 75. The school year lasted 40 weeks, beginning after Labor Day and ending in mid-June. Teachers usually sat at a desk situated in the front of the room, while we sat at desks that were screwed to the floor and arranged in rows. We were graded four times each semester, largely on the basis of our performance on teacher-made tests and on homework assignments.

Aside from the fixed seating, I submit that the 4,000-student high school I attended 40 years ago is not fundamentally different, structurally and organizationally, from the high schools operating today. Furthermore, I believe that the school I attended is much like the ones that most *Kappan* readers attended, at least those who attended urban schools.

In the past decade or so, much of the literature on schooling has emphasized the influence of school structure on what students learn in school.<sup>5</sup> The content of a student's experience is shaped not only by the explicit curriculum, but by the kind of place any particular school is. And that is influenced by the way the school is organized, by the way teachers' roles are defined, by the way students are rewarded, and by the priorities that the school sets. From a structural perspective, American schools, particularly secondary schools, have been extremely stable.

Another source of stability derives from the content of the curriculum. In broad terms, the content areas that are

# Curriculum Reform

emphasized in schools have been extremely stable: English, social studies, math, science, foreign language, art, music, and physical education. Today computer literacy has replaced typing, but where is anthropology or law or child development or political science or feminist studies? I am well aware that each of these subjects is taught in some schools somewhere. But these subjects are not among the mainstream subjects that have been staples in American schools for more than six decades. Why?

Part of the reason is tradition. We do what we know how to do. Furthermore, our professional associations of subject-matter specialists also stabilize the curriculum. When the American Anthropological Association developed an anthropology curriculum for American secondary schools in the 1960s, it had to disguise it as a social studies course rather than as a course in anthropology. We protect our turf.

Another stabilizing factor is our textbooks. They are designed to take no risks, and they strive to alienate no one. They are usually models of the dull, the routine, and the intellectually feckless. Typically, they are dense collections of facts that read much like the Los Angeles telephone book: a great many players, but not much plot. The recent efforts in California to create a framework for history and social science that *does* look interesting may motivate publishers to be a bit more courageous. Generally speaking, however, since textbooks define the content and shape the form in which students encounter that content, their conservative character serves to resist change.

Teachers with limited time for planning and little intellectual contact with their professional colleagues are unlikely to redefine curriculum content radically. In any case, the changes teachers make are almost always within the confines of the courses they teach, and these courses operate within the constraints of the traditional school. The 50-minute hour is as much a sacred cow in the school as it is on the psychiatrist's couch. In a conservative educational climate, such as we have today, the difficulty of substantially altering curriculum content is even greater.

Yet another stabilizing agent is standardized testing, which neither teachers nor school administrators can afford to ignore. As long as teachers are held accountable by tests other than the ones

they design, testing programs are likely to foster conservative educational practices. Standardized tests are intended to measure the achievement of large groups of students for whom there are common expectations. Deviation from the content to be covered constitutes a political and professional hazard for teachers. Indeed, if the virtue of test scores is their ability to predict future grades or future test scores, a conservative function is built into the test: stability, not variability, of conditions is likely to increase the predictive validity of the tests.

But educational innovation is predicated on change — not only in the *form* of educational method used, but also in the *content* and *goals* of education. Innovation is also predicated, I believe, on the desire to cultivate productive idiosyncrasy among students. While some common educational fare is reasonable and appropriate for all students, standardized tests that make invisible the unique and productively idiosyncratic in students perform a conservative function in school programs. *A Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* is a testament to such a conservative function.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, such conservatism in education is attractive, particularly when schools are receiving bad press. The past always seems to exude a rosy glow, and Americans seem to require an absence of ambiguity. Thus it is reassuring to have a cultural dictionary that identifies, once and for all, “what every American should know.” This need for stability — more than the educationally trivial but publicly visible drop in scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) — is what Americans should really be concerned about. Why do we need such security? Why do we require a blueprint to follow on matters that beg for interpretation, for consideration of context, for flexibility, and most of all for judgment? If American educators have something to worry about, it is the national fear of exercising judgment, coupled with our political apathy, that must rank highest.

Methods of evaluation that are operationalized through standardized tests are given even more significance in the American university than in the public schools. With a few exceptions, American universities are not notable for adopting an adventurous — or even liberal — attitude toward defining admissions criteria. Universities protect tradition. They take SAT scores more seriously than they are willing to admit, and many now con-



sider enrollment in Advanced Placement courses as admissions criteria. What were once “options” for students have become prescriptions for university admission. Not to have such courses on your transcript is tantamount to an admission of intellectual sloth, at least for those seeking entrance to our most prestigious universities.

Such expectations exert a chilling effect on innovative course development and on students' enrollment patterns. When students have the opportunity to take really innovative courses during that blue-sky period in high school known as the eighth semester, what are academically oriented students doing? They are taking courses in high school that they will have available to them in college six months later. Is faster always better?

Such practices and norms are essentially conservative. Collectively, tradition, textbooks, and evaluation systems work to stabilize the curricular status quo. As a result, when calls for change are made, they almost always focus on the least significant aspects of schooling: more days in school, higher standards, more years of math and science, more of the same.

**D**ESPITE THESE stabilizing factors, what effects might curriculum scholars have if we reclaimed our voice in the public conversation about the schools? What would we have to say about what should be taught in schools? What if we were given a platform from which to address the public? The results, I think, would be as follows.

It would quickly become clear that there is a profound lack of consensus about what schools should teach among those whose line of work is curriculum. The Neo-Marxists would continue to

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complain. The feminists would want attention paid to gender issues in schools. Curriculum analysts would continue to analyze, to avoid commitment, and to advocate the need for more data and more deliberation. Curricular conservatives would advance (or is it retreat?) to a reemphasis on the disciplines. The developmentally oriented among us would begin with the needs of the individual child as a foundation for what should be taught in schools. Those still interested in the power of process would claim that what is taught is less important than how it is taught. Cognitive skills, they would argue, can be developed by repairing a Mazda as well as by studying *Macbeth*. The re-conceptualists would continue to remind us that it is personal experience that really counts and that other starting points for curriculum are essentially coercive or irrelevant. In short, we would have not a symphony, but a cacophony.

Would this be bad? I think not. What *is* bad is a false sense of certainty, and that has characterized too many of the recent recommendations for education reform. President Bush is going to improve American education the old-fashioned way: he's going to reward good schools with more money. Chrysler Corporation is going to improve American schools by frightening the American public with a Japanese boogiemán. William Bennett's approach was to create a James Madison High School curriculum that would be good medicine for everyone.

The debate could use more voices and deeper, more penetrating analyses of what schools should teach and the kinds of places schools should be. America desperately needs serious discussion of the condition of our schools and of the content and form of school programs. If curriculum scholars, having once reclaimed their voices, could significantly deepen the dialogue by exploring the options, we would have made an extremely important contribution to the culture.

Does anybody hear any voices?

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1. John I. Goodlad, *A Place Called School* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984).

2. Theodore R.Sizer, *Horace's Compromise* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

3. Ernest Boyer, *High School* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

4. Mortimer J. Adler, *The Paideia Proposal* (New York: Macmillan, 1982).

5. Robert Dreeben, *On What Is Learned in School* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968).

6. E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *A Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988). 

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# Is There a Curriculum Voice to Reclaim?

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*The sidelines may be comfortable places to sit. But sitting there, Mr. Apple warns, will give curriculum scholars little influence on the lives of real children and teachers.*

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BY MICHAEL W. APPLE

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**H**ERBERT SPENCER was not wrong when he reminded educators that one of the fundamental questions we should ask about schooling is, "What knowledge is of most worth?" The question is a deceptively simple one, however, since the conflicts over what should be taught have been sharp and deep. The issue is not only an educational one, but also an inherently ideological and political one. Whether we recognize it or not, curriculum and more general educational issues in the U.S. have always been caught up in the history of class, race, gender, and religious relations.<sup>1</sup>

A better way of phrasing the question — a way that highlights the profoundly political nature of educational debate — is, "Whose knowledge is of most worth?"<sup>2</sup> That this question is not simply academic is strikingly clear from the fact that calls for censorship and controversies over the values that the schools teach (or don't teach) have made the curriculum a political football in school districts throughout the country.

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The public debate on education and on all social issues has shifted profoundly to the right in the past decade. The effects of this shift can be seen in a number of trends now gaining momentum nationally: proposals for voucher plans and tax credits to make school systems more like the thoroughly idealized free market economy; the movement in state legislatures and state departments of education to "raise standards" and to mandate teacher and student "competencies," thereby increasing the centralization of control of teaching and curricula; the often-effective assault on the school curriculum for its supposed biases against the family and free enterprise, for its "secular humanism," for its lack of patriotism, and for its failure to teach the content, values, and character traits that have made the "western tradition" what it is; and the consistent pressure to make the needs of business and industry the primary concerns of the education system.<sup>3</sup>

The rightist and neoconservative movements have entered education as the social democratic goal of expanding equality of opportunity has lost much of its political potency and appeal. The prevailing concerns today — panic over falling standards and rising rates of illiteracy, the fear of violence in the schools, and the perceived destruction of family and religious values — have al-