

Persistent Issues In The School Curriculum

By Marlow Ediger

The school curriculum undergoes continuous assessment. Change appears to be the order of the day in teaching and learning situations. Change agents recommend re-doing the curriculum and making needed modifications. Many of these recommendations pertain to the structure of the curriculum. There are key elements at the heart of making revisions. Three structural elements will be discussed, namely the objectives, the learning activities and the evaluation sections of curriculum development (Ediger, 2003).

Objectives in the Curriculum

There are changes in deciding who is to determine objectives for student attainment. Who is to select the ends of instruction? Toward one end of the continuum, the state has taken a leadership role through legislation. At the state level, mandated objectives are written for learner attainment. Each state is also responsible for writing its own tests. Testing is done at selected grade levels to measure if gains made by each student are adequate for promotion to the next grade level. Standardized tests which contain multiple choice test items are used by which all students take the same grade level test with the



same allotted time limits. No provision is made for individual differences such as for slow learners and special education students. Standardized testing stresses the importance of all conditions being the same for all students at a specific grade level. Toward the other end of the continuum, before the days of mandated testing, teachers wrote their own tests based on what an individual or team of teachers had taught. A variety of test items were written to measure learner progress as well as to diagnose student problems in learning. Presently, teachers still write their own tests, but less frequently, since mandated tests are given once a year. Selected teachers may also use procedures other than testing for learners to indicate achievement, such as drawings, construction activities, and dramatizations. The issue becomes, "Who should write test items, the state level or local classroom teachers, to assess learner achievement?" (See, Korthagen, 2004)

Which categories of objectives should be emphasized in teaching students? Mandated objectives/ tests stress the inclusion of cognitive ends only. Lower level cognitive objectives are generally stressed in mandated tests, such as recall and mere comprehension of information. These have answers which are the easiest to assess by using machine scoring. Classroom teachers might well stress attitudinal ends also. Quality attitudes are salient for all learners. Good attitudes assist students to achieve more optimally in knowledge and skills ends of instruction (Ediger, 2003).

Learning Activities in the Curriculum

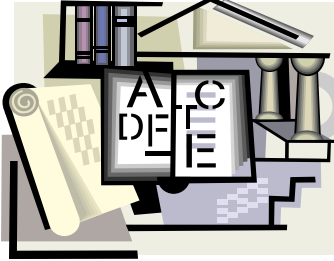
With mandated objectives, the trend has been to emphasize much drill and practice so that test scores go up. There have been school administrators who have advocated that teachers teach only what will be on the state-mandated test. They feel this is what counts since students need to pass their grade level tests to be promoted to the next successive grade. Also, schools need to pass the designated adequate yearly progress (AYP) standard, with penalties involved if this does not happen, such as being labeled a failing school for two years of failing test scores. Mathematics and reading are presently the two curriculum areas which mandate testing. Science will be added in 2007.

This still leaves out the social studies and the fine arts, among others.


Prior to mandated testing in 2002, educators stressed balance in the curriculum, meaning all major curriculum areas needed to receive their fair share of attention. General education involves more than reading and mathematics. It involves a broadly educated person. Students possess diverse abilities individually. These need to be provided for in the classroom. Thus, a learner may show much ability in one or more academic disciplines such as in the language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, the fine and practical arts, and music. In addition, selected students may show ability in technical education with its hands-on approaches to learning. A broadly educated person may well be one who has special talents and abilities (Intrator and Kunzman, 2006).

Academic disciplines might well be integrated when problem solving and project methods of instruction are used in teaching and learning situations. Students may be:

- * motivated to achieve more
- * encouraged through interesting learning opportunities
- * permitted to select individual versus group methods of instruction





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- * challenged to achieve objectives of instruction
- * introduced to and participate in choosing tasks at different learning stations.

Teachers, presently, may still schedule time to provide for individual differences in the curriculum in which each student's strengths are recognized and provided for. They need to be advocates of educating students to fulfill personal needs as well as those in society. It does become increasingly difficult to provide

for individual differences and needs as pressures for student achievement mount due to mandated objectives of instruction which are imposed upon teachers (See Senge, 2000).

Assessment of Achievement and Progress

With mandated objectives of instruction determined on the state level, the assessment procedures have also been developed on the state level. The assessment procedures tend to be multiple choice test items that are

aligned with the objectives. A mass number of tests can be scored with computers when using objective test items. When conditions are kept the same for all students in standardized testing on each grade level, positive differences in results indicate more progress for the involved student. Students are passed to the next grade level if a satisfactory test score is secured. If a school received satisfactory test results on adequate yearly progress (AYP), then the school is labeled as "satisfactory." It must make for negative feelings if one's school is labeled as "failing."

The "one size fits all" approach in testing has been criticized by educators in that a single standardized test determines achievement and progress. Additional approaches to testing to ascertain learner achievement might well include:

- * portfolios which contain a random sampling of learner products covering instruction in different subject matter areas during a specific interval of time;
- * video tapes showing student progress such as in a discussion or problem solving situation;
- * self evaluation by the learner of a completed project or other activity;
- * objects constructed related to an ongoing unit of study,

using rubric means of appraisal;

- * art projects completed pertaining to lesson/unit clarification;
- * projects developed in an activity-centered curriculum (Ediger, 2006).

Conclusion

There are persistent issues in the curriculum within the framework of choosing objectives, learning activities, and assessment procedures. These issues include mandated procedures versus teacher involvement in determining the curriculum. Also included are measurement philosophies versus a more activity-centered curriculum in teaching and learning situations. In the area of assessing student progress, a single test as compared to using multiple procedures to ascertain learner achievement is truly a major hurdle to overcome.

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