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ABSTRACT

The first part of this article provides an assortment of scenarios depicting how control over school curricula is divided up in Canada. While reviewing these vignettes, the reader is encouraged to keep the following specific questions in mind: (1) What content is desirable for the learner? (2) How much of said content is to be prescribed? (3) Is curriculum decision-making centralized or decentralized? (4) Who is to decide the "what," the "how much," and the "how"? As the scenarios are placed on a continuum, varying degrees of centralization become apparent. Curriculum activity occurs at several levels of remoteness from the learner. A hierarchy of decision-making becomes evident when the settings are closely scrutinized. In some cases extensive teacher involvement in deciding the "what" takes place, in others the curricular decisions are made by total school staffs under the leadership of the principal or of personnel from the central office, and in others the decision-making becomes the responsibility of school boards and departments of education. In reality, there is often overlap among these levels. (Author/IRT)

CANADA'S CURRICULUM CONTINUUM

Patrick Babin, Ph.D.

Curriculum development in Canada is a provincial concern. High-level, long-range plans for reaching objectives are formulated, and frequently expressed in policy statements issued by provincial departments or ministries of education. These plans may be referred to as strategies. Are there discernible similarities in approaches?

Does the choice of tactics to be used in carrying out the strategies differ from region to region? Are there diverse interpretations of curriculum at the provincial level? Do these explications, in turn, influence curriculum decision-making? Is this decision-making a collaborative undertaking between the provinces and other levels in the educational hierarchy? These questions become more significant as the reader gains insight vis-à-vis provincial involvement.

The first part of this article provides an assortment of scenarios depicting hypothetical postures which could conceivably be reflected in each of the provinces. While reviewing these vignettes, the reader is encouraged to keep the aforementioned questions in mind, and to pose the following more specific queries: (1) What content is desirable for the learner? (2) How much of said content is to be prescribed? (3) Is curriculum decision-making centralized or decentralized? (4) Who is to decide the what? how much? and the how?

The characterizations highlighted in the following episodes identify a number of conscious policy choices that affect what is learned and the participants in this decision-making process.

Mrs. Brown, principal of Emily Carr Elementary School, examines the latest provincial statement of curriculum policy. The latter is reflected in an extensive list of educational objectives. The foreword to the document acknowledges input from educators and lay citizens. A supplementary brochure stipulates a comprehensive list of textbooks approved for use in the province, with an introductory paragraph explaining that all textbooks must be selected from those listed in the compendium, unless permission for other selections has been granted by the province. Mrs. Brown wonders whether the educational objectives expressed in the provincial document are really reflected in the enclosed textbook list. She also notes that Tim Ford's personal choice for a new science textbook does not appear on the mandated list. Tim is a seventh grade teacher in that school.

It would appear that curriculum development in this jurisdiction is largely a provincial concern, with prescription the order of the day.

An adaptation of the Emily Carr scenario is evident in another situation, where...

> the Director of Education of Massey County, in another province, receives a long-anticipated parcel containing a booklet delineating the goals of the provincially-mandated core curriculum. The basic skills and knowledge all learners should acquire are included. According to an introductory statement by the Minister of Education, the content of this official publication represents material which must be learned. These minimal curricular requirements must be implemented within a specified time-frame. No textbooks are prescribed.

A more convergent approach to curriculum construction predominates in this setting, with teacher input primarily confined to selecting textbooks and other learning materials consonant with the prescribed core curriculum.

Still another variation to the above theme is the situation where...

> a document has just been completed within the Department of Education stating the goals of education. It sets out in a general way the learning opportunities that the programs in the schools should make available. Accompanying the policy statement are a number of curriculum guidelines which spell out the educational objectives for each discipline. Consultants (provincial and local), writers (provincial and local), and validators (provincial and local) developed these guidelines. Upon release to local jurisdictions, school boards will be encouraged to translate the guidelines into more specific courses of study.

Although provincial centralization of curriculum development is discernible in the above, teacher decision-making is possible in the process of translating the guidelines and in choosing appropriate textbooks and learning materials. Local and regional input is also elicited in the development of the provincial guidelines. A cyclical approach to curriculum construction is manifest.

A further diversification of the Emily Carr vignette is noted in...

> a provincial document listing approved courses for adoption by any or all schools in that province. An ancillary supplement to the aforementioned publication is a course of study for each approved course, along with a policy statement explaining the learning assessment program based on these courses of study. This evaluation plan, developed at the provincial level as a follow-up to the establishment of an item bank, is to be administered by local educators; assessment results are to be monitored by educational officials at the provincial level.

Not only is this particular provincial stance prescriptive, it stipulates an assessment component intended to monitor content mastery in every classroom in that province. Minimal teacher involvement in curriculum decision-making is probable.

Varying degrees of centralization are evident in the above scenarios. In all settings, teacher decision-making in curriculum development is relegated to the translation of prescribed content and the implementation of that content in

the classroom, with the exception of the episode where local participation in the development of provincial guidelines was encouraged.

How do the aforementioned sketches differ from the following?

> The Middleton Board of Education Curriculum Committee is responsible for the development of curriculum in its district, in accordance with broad curriculum goals issued by the provincial department of education. The government posture is that curriculum should be closely related to the characteristics and needs of the particular pupils for whom it is planned. The members of the committee, largely teachers, are released from their regular assignments two half-days each month to participate in this task. The superintendent of curriculum coordinates committee activities.

Curricular decision-making in Middleton is primarily the responsibility of faculty groups under the leadership of administrators. Those closest to the learning environment play a key role in determining content, its organization, related learning experiences, and evaluation.

A modification of that format is observable in the Oliver School District where...

> the broadly delineated curriculum goals mandated by the provincial ministry of education are shared with the principals of each elementary and secondary school in the jurisdiction. In this district, curriculum is seen as a means to an end - a conscious and deliberate shaping of the major elements at the disposal of teachers to reach the mandated provincial goals. Curriculum change is expected to occur within each school at the discretion of principals, staff, learners, and parents.

The Oliver teachers, in conjunction with their principals, the learners, and lay citizens, are expected to make most decisions relative to curriculum and instruction, provided they operate within the general parameters established by the Board of Education and the Ministry's curriculum goals. The building principal, in this setting, is seen as playing a key role in monitoring curriculum decision-making. His involvement would be analogous to that of procedural task-master (Myers, 1970), exemplified in his/her involvement as a resource person, a group process monitor,

and interpreter and enforcer of policy, an upward communication agent, and a stability agent.

Degrees of Centralization

As these scenarios are placed on a continuum, varying degrees of centralization become apparent. At one end, curriculum development is largely a local concern with teachers as decision-makers. At the other extremity, a more convergent approach to curriculum construction predominates. At this pole, one finds a greater degree of involvement at the provincial level.

A multitude of decisions contribute to an intended curriculum. Someone in authority, either at the provincial or local level, advances anticipatory input relative to content. These same individuals may also make suggestions relative to methodology, and the order of instruction. This input, varying in degree of specificity, is anticipatory with an intent in mind. This writer thinks of curriculum as a written document depicting content, but general enough to allow teacher responsibility in the interpretation and translation of that document in accordance with teaching styles and the needs and experiences of the learners. The element of intent (planning) is crucial to this interpretation. The degree of curricular specificity, as noted in the vignettes, may vary considerably. The degree of teacher involvement also reflects much variance.

Because of this heterogeneity, both in the degree of involvement on the part of individuals in curriculum decisions and in the extent of specificity in the curriculum documents themselves, the intended outcome cannot always be guaranteed. It would be naive to assume that all recipients will derive the same meaning from a curriculum document. Once materials have left the developers' hands, they may be interpreted and utilized in innumerable ways. «Curriculum may be seen as the embodiment of a potential, independent of its developers' intentions, that can be discovered and revealed...» (Ben-Peretz, 1975). That recognition of potential, in conjunction with the human factor, is a critical adjunct to the preceding explication of curriculum.

In a country where the jurisdiction over education lies with provincial authorities, it is conceivable that a curricular posture indigenous to each of the provinces and territories will eventuate. There is no national curriculum; there may be common threads, identical issues, and similar needs, but regional differences and provincial autonomy mitigate against homogeneity in curriculum decision-making.

The evolution of diverse curricular stances comes about as a result of complex networks of political decision-making. Pressure groups representing many facets of society propose content for inclusion in the curriculum. Political

parties get into the act; business and industry join the chorus line. At times, curriculum change appears to be counter-cyclical. What was popular in the past often emerges, perhaps a bit camouflaged, in contemporary dialogue. It becomes obvious as one studies this intricate network that there are many leverage points in this interplay.

Decisions at Many Levels

Curriculum activity occurs at several levels of remoteness from the learner. For that matter, seldom is the learner involved in the determination of content. A hierarchy of decision-making becomes evident when the settings are closely scrutinized. There are many stakeholders in the process. For example, decision-making may be primarily under the auspices of teachers operating at the instructional level, as noted in the Middleton School District. This decentralized posture reflects a belief that curriculum should be closely related to the needs, characteristics, and interests of the particular pupils for whom it is planned. This position leads to extensive teacher involvement in deciding the what. On the other hand, much activity may occur at the institutional or school level where curricular decisions are made by total school staffs under the leadership of the principal and possibly personnel from central office, as exemplified by the Oliver group. The focus in this setting would be on

the needs and characteristics of the particular teachers, learners, and lay citizens in that school setting.

A third echelon in the hierarchy is the societal. At this level, decision-making in curriculum becomes the responsibility of school boards and departments of education. This level is more representative of society at large. Examples of it are found in the Emily Carr scenario and its adaptations.

Seldom are these levels discrete; in reality, there is often considerable fluidity and overlap between and among them. It is possible to find situations where an interplay exists. These levels can be plotted on the continuum mentioned at the outset. They are also reflected in the scenarios. Time and circumstance create undulation between and among these levels. This in turn contributes to the complexities of the reality of curriculum development. Which group does what and at what level? What is the degree of involvement? What criteria guide their deliberations? Does each level respect the decision-making powers of the other(s)? How can usurpation be avoided? How can the responsibilities of all concerned be organized and respected? Who monitors the decision-making process? What is curriculum decision-making? Are there commonalities in the process, regardless of curriculum posture and/or levels of involvement?

A Summary Reflection

There are no prescriptions. Each of the preceding questions must be considered in context. «To complicate matters further, the shape of that context, the configurations that it displays, shift over time.» (Eisner, 1979) These same questions highlight the intricacies of curriculum development.

The author's intent in this article has been to expose the reader to the realities of Canada's curricular landscape in the year 1980. Rational decision-making in the field of curriculum necessitates a mustering of the best of both funded knowledge and conventional wisdom - a blending of theoretical deliberation and praxis.

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