

the politics of Curriculum

by Frank Kelly and Pauline Laing

When government policy agendas include major changes to curriculum, questions inevitably arise. How should a democratic society determine what students learn? Who should design the curriculum? How should the curriculum take into account the specific skills of citizenship? Will it become a vehicle for promoting the political persuasions of the government that creates it?

What students should learn: who decides?

Curriculum is more than what teachers choose to teach, what students prefer to learn, or what authors write in textbooks. Teachers have daily opportunities to demonstrate the art of instruction and to make learning vivid and memorable, but they are not self-employed practitioners. The curriculum they teach is public policy, designed to outline what society believes young people need to learn to be “privately happy and publicly useful.” Teachers contract to serve their students and society by implementing that policy in their classrooms.

Who should set the policy? If curriculum is to be an authentic expression of societal purpose, it cannot be the narrow prescription of a few people or the simple embodiment of a current political agenda. While the actual writing of curriculum may be the work of experts with specialized understanding of learning processes and subject disciplines, establishing its broader purposes calls for wide participation. Such participation has not been the norm in Canada, where most provinces have a long tradition of educator-generated curriculum. Provincial curriculum documents typically receive careful scrutiny from educators and little attention from the public. When the public does become involved, educators are often wary that business or community advocates will impose their ideas on the classroom and push critical thinking to the side. They fear that the views of a few, without the balance of opposing opinion, may have undue influence on what all students learn.

According to Daniel Yankelwich, “The key to successful governance in our Age of Information is to create a new balance between public and experts. Today that relationship is badly skewed towards experts at the expense of the public.” He goes on to describe two contributing factors: disproportionate reverence for “expertise” in our society, and a general inability to develop high quality public judgment, which he defines as “the state of highly developed public opinion that exists once people have engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make.”¹ Following Yankelwich’s line of reasoning, we should not only welcome professional expertise, we should also ask how we can elicit



Somewhere in Ontario, in the year 1993, a 13 year-old has heard from his teacher that things will be different when he goes to high school. Instead of choosing courses in one of three streams in grade 9, he will enroll in a destreamed program. He has heard his parents discussing the changes (they have been assured that the new emphasis is on something called “outcomes”), and being precocious, has read a newspaper article about how schools will be stressing problem-solving and something called integrated learning. He is uncertain whether high school will be more or less like elementary school, but he knows that his teachers are in a flurry deciding what to make of their new marching orders and that his parents are concerned.

Five years later his equally precocious 13-year-old sister has heard from her teacher about the new curriculum she must master to be ready for high school in 1999 when things will really be different for secondary students. She has read about this curriculum in a brochure delivered to her house (it is definitely more rigorous and attentive to the basics than its predecessor) and heard about it on TV announcements (it will improve the disappointing test scores on international tests). She realizes that this much stir about what kids learn means adults are worried. What is wrong, she wonders, with what her brother was learning if such a revolution is required to set it right.

What students learn in school has always been a matter of public interest, and never more than now when school curricula and assessment are attracting public attention worldwide. Democratic societies demand strong public school systems for their citizens, and governments are often elected on the promise of education reform - resulting in abrupt changes like those reported by our Ontario brother and sister. From Tony Blair’s mandate for literacy hours in England to summer school classes in Toronto, oversubscribed with students who have struggled with the new Math curriculum, controversy rages over what is taught - or not taught - and whether schools are putting our future prosperity in jeopardy.

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the collective wisdom of the public and how we can maximize the contributions of both teachers and community members.

Achieving high quality public judgment on an issue as important as what students learn in school requires a carefully orchestrated process. Simplified public opinion polls will not suffice, nor will competing recommendations from groups with a position to defend. Those with a small business perspective might call for graduates prepared in mathematics, literacy and computers so that extensive entry training is not necessary. But what would they think about the importance of the arts if they were able to engage in balanced, informed dialogue about the total school program? Champions of factual knowledge might claim that we know too little about our own history. But would they object to incorporating the skills of inquiry and group endeavour if they had an opportunity for thoughtful discussion with those who most valued these skills? How would those concerned about standards of literacy respond to the question “How good is good enough?” after being given a realistic view of current demographics and the skills of fourteen-year-olds? Creating opportunities for the development of quality public judgment should become an integral part of curriculum development. Perhaps governments could then gain political points by pointing to the consensus they have created rather than by claiming to have cured the ills of the past.

Ontario’s current secondary school curriculum reform has included significant public involvement. Committees of community representatives and educators thrashed out issues and wrote papers suggesting basic directions before development began; community members participated on all subject writing teams; and various constituent groups (business associations, professional organizations, parent and community groups) were asked for their comments during the writing process. But questions remain about the appropriate role of educators and the public, and the amount of influence they should be able to exert on the government’s agenda for change. After extensive public participation, curriculum documents were scrutinized for consistency with the government’s educational goals. Some passed scrutiny with ease; others required minor changes; still others were sent back for revision and substantial change.

Curriculum and the Skills of Citizenship

Ontario is following the lead of many other jurisdictions by including among diploma requirements a course in civics, a course in career studies, and a prescription for community

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Comment une société devrait-elle s’y prendre pour décider ce que les élèves doivent apprendre ? Qui doit concevoir les programmes d’études ? De quelle façon le curriculum devrait-il prendre en compte les aptitudes particulières qui touchent l’exercice de la citoyenneté ? Dans quelle mesure ce curriculum peut-il ou doit-il refléter l’idéologie du gouvernement en place ? Les événements survenus récemment illustrent l’importance de ces questions, et la nécessité pour éducateurs et éducatrices, citoyens et citoyennes, d’engager des discussions critiques et approfondies sur un large éventail de questions relatives au programme d’études.

service. All three are designed to provide specific preparation for participation in society. Although some support these approaches, many teachers and parents argue that more important preparation for citizenship takes place within the social environment of the school and across the entire curriculum. Democracy requires literate, knowledgeable and creative citizens who take responsibility for the public good and respect the rights and opinions of others, as well as contribute to the economic well-being of the country.

Day-to-day interactions among students and teachers play an important role in developing these personal characteristics. When schools allow their students to have a voice in decisions affecting them they teach important lessons about responsibility. When schools invite discussion of society’s serious issues, they force students to examine their own views and the personal decisions they would make as in the larger context of life outside school. Learning to make such choices leads ultimately to a mature form of citizenship.

In addition to this “casual curriculum”, however, the formal curriculum plays an important part in establishing the habits of citizenship. We do our society a great disservice if we allow curriculum to be stripped of serious social issues because they might lead to expressions of contentious opinions in the classroom. Students need to debate the same topics which are debated in the public arena - environmental regulation, the fate of the poor, our responsibility to aboriginal people. And they need to engage in moral, ethical and political debate, encouraged by a reading of history and literature. Education of the whole person is not antithetical to rigorous preparation for a competitive marketplace.

Learning or Persuasion?

It seems at first self-evident that curriculum should be apolitical; schools should not be used to promote single views on important topics. When we think of issues that high school students might address - like nuclear energy, conservation in our national parks, or the future of public broadcasting - we hope that emerging graduates will demonstrate the range of views that careful thought and lively debate engender. We shudder at the prospect of indoctrination and the fervent conformity required by authoritarian societies. But is it possible, or even reasonable, to ask a government to produce a formal curriculum that in no way reflects its own philosophical preferences? Probably not. Among the expert opinions canvassed and the broader societal views solicited there will be diversity, and the government of the day will need to make choices. Even when it is scrupulous in its decision-making, a government, like any group or individual, reflects its own preferences and ideologies in its choices.

Recent developments in Ontario illustrate the subtle and perhaps inevitable politicization of curriculum. The current Tory government’s *Ontario Curriculum* for elementary schools differs in a number of revealing ways from the NDP’s *Common Curriculum* which was released four years earlier. The *Ontario Curriculum* emphasizes traditional subjects, and its grade-by-grade organization assumes that students should meet set

expectations in every grade - and on time for their grade level, unless there is some good explanation for falling behind. The *Common Curriculum*, on the other hand, stressed that time was a variable, and that everyone could learn. Organized by three-year groupings and four "Areas of Study", it emphasized the need for each student to achieve outcomes in an order and on a schedule that suited the child. It was more explicit about social attitudes and issues like anti-racism.

Stated in the most general terms, *The Common Curriculum* focussed more on the student as learner, while *The Ontario Curriculum* focuses more on the skills and knowledge that every student should acquire. Of course, neither document denies entirely what the other emphasizes. *The Common Curriculum* contains statements about what must be learned, and *The Ontario Curriculum* talks about the individuality of each student. Nonetheless, a careful comparison of the two reveals different emphases which are consistent with the political views of their creators.

Can we conclude, then, that each government has shaped the learning of children in ways that are more likely to produce a generation attuned to its particular political perspective and world view? Would children with a full eight years of the *Ontario Curriculum* be more likely to be good Tories, while those with eight years of education guided by *The Common Curriculum* be inclined to socialist leanings? If such political persuasion were either a clear purpose or a likely result of provincial curriculum, we would have cause for worry. In a

democracy, it would be hard to argue in favour of an education system that produced voters of a single stripe.

Conclusion

We need to find a way to minimize the link between the politics of the day and what students learn, without closing the door to ongoing curriculum change. The key, we believe, is to encourage joint participation of educators and citizens in high quality discussion and judgements about broad curricular issues, like the balance of subjects, the social and intellectual skills to be emphasized, the appropriate standards to be set, and how to teach the personal characteristics most important to participation in a democratic society. By encouraging broad involvement of educators and citizens in determining these curriculum objectives, we will move our schools away from curriculum revolution toward continuous creative growth and evolution.

1 Daniel Yankelwich, *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse University Press, 1991) 11.

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