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COMMON LEARNINGS: A 50-YEAR QUEST

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ABSTRACT: This article is a reflection on what I have learned from more than 50 years of experience in professional education, most of it devoted to the study and teaching of what are known as common learnings. As used here, the phrase "common learnings" refers to the knowledge, skills, and values that are considered essential for any citizen, regardless of occupation or station in life. I favor the core curriculum design that evolved during the Eight Year Study of the Progressive Education Association and that incorporates balanced consideration of three major curriculum foundations: psychological, social, and philosophical. I contrast this with current efforts to impose adult-determined standards without due consideration of the needs of students or of the tenets of democracy. I describe three waves of popular interest in interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction that I have experienced, and call for reconsideration of approaches to common learnings that simultaneously incorporate the expectations of society, the needs of learners, and the principles of democracy.

What should every citizen of this country know and be able to do, regardless of who that person is and where that person grows up? Our nation is again engaged in a massive effort to define those "common learnings" and to ensure that they are acquired by every student. The dominant approach these days is for professional associations and state departments of education to establish standards, competencies, or proficiencies and then to use state-mandated tests to see if students have met them. Is this the best approach? What are the alternatives? Who should be involved?

In this article I focus primarily on the curriculum design aspects of our society's quest for common learnings. Space does not permit examination of important related issues, such as assessment and evaluation; preparation of teachers, administrators, and other professionals; and the political processes of determining educational policy in a democracy. My hope is that the following observations,

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based on more than 50 years in education, may provide a useful perspective on curriculum design and development.

Thirty years ago I edited a book entitled *Common Learnings: Core and Interdisciplinary Team Approaches*.[1] Contributors included classroom teachers, administrators, and curriculum specialists, and the book included numerous examples of common learnings programs from around the country. The book was dedicated to Harold Alberty, with whom I had studied core curriculum at Ohio State University. Alberty, a widely known advocate of the core approach to common learnings, had been a curriculum consultant for the Eight Year Study of the Progressive Education Association.

Soon afterward I again addressed this topic at a conference on junior high and middle school education at Indiana State University. The question-and-answer session at lunch was chaired by William Van Til, my mentor from Peabody College days, who was then the Coffman Distinguished Professor of Education at I.S.U. Van Til had joined the quest for common learnings in 1934 when he became a core teacher at the Ohio State University School in Columbus. He later completed a doctorate at Ohio State under Alberty's direction. Both of these men have written frequently and eloquently on curriculum design and development.

A lot has happened in the world and in the field of education since 1969. Yet the problem of what to do about common learnings is still with us. My observations are organized around the following questions: What are "common learnings"? How are they determined? How *should* they be determined? What proportion of the curriculum should be devoted to them? What curriculum design is best for delivering them? How do we know?

WHAT ARE "COMMON LEARNINGS"?

Here is how I explained the concept of common learnings in my 1969 book:

> Common learnings are those that are considered essential to any citizen, regardless of his [or her] occupation or station in life. These fundamental concepts, skills, and values bind a society together, making communication and cooperative action possible. Examples include knowledge of how our government operates, skill in reading, and respect for the worth and dignity of the individual. This "general education" contrasts with the "specialized education" that is designed to promote the uniqueness of each individual. Elective courses in foreign language and specific vocational preparation would fall in the latter category.[2]

[1]Gordon F. Vars, *Common Learnings: Core and Interdisciplinary Team Approaches* (Scranton, PA: Intext, 1969).

[2]Ibid., p. v.

Although the term "common learnings" is not used much today, that is essentially what educators are defining when they establish standards, competencies, and proficiencies to be met by all students.

HOW ARE COMMON LEARNINGS DETERMINED?

Many individuals and groups have put forth what they consider to be essential learnings for all citizens. Their rationales often emphasize different curriculum foundations, such as social functions, personal-social needs of youth, structure of the disciplines, and even international comparisons of student achievement. For example, in 1860 Herbert Spencer addressed this question in his essay "What Knowledge Is of Most Worth?" He recommended learnings that help people perform a number of *social functions,* such as self-preservation, rearing children, maintaining "proper social and political relations," and leisure-time activities.[3] In the 1930s and '40s, the Progressive Education Association, through its Commission on Secondary School Curriculum, identified common learnings that would meet the *personal-social needs of young people* in a democratic society. These were spelled out in a series of books, such as *Science in General Education, The Visual Arts in General Education,* and *Language in General Education.*[4] These served as guides for the experimental secondary schools participating in the Progressive Education Association's famous Eight Year Study.[5]

Both *social functions* and the *needs of youth* were addressed in the comprehensive study of the "behavioral outcomes of general education in high school" jointly sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the Educational Testing Service. These detailed recommendations were edited by Will French and published in 1957.[6] Note that this also was the year that the Soviet satellite *Sputnik* launched the space race and provoked a major overhaul of public schools in the United States. During the 1960s, common learnings were defined mostly in terms of the *"structure of the disciplines,"* as set forth by Jerome Bruner in *The Process of Education.*[7]

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[3]Herbert Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1860), pp. 13–14.

[4]Commission on Secondary School Curriculum, Progressive Education Association, *Science in General Education* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1938); *The Visual Arts in General Education* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1940); *Language in General Education* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1940).

[5]Wilford Aikin, *The Story of the Eight Year Study* (New York: Harper, 1942).

[6]Will French and Associates, *Behavioral Goals of General Education in High School* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1957).

[7]Jerome S. Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

A still different way of defining common learnings was proposed by E. D. Hirsch in his book *Cultural Literacy,* published in 1987.[8] The "Core Knowledge Resource Series" of curriculum guides subsequently published by his foundation spell out in detail what everyone should know based on "research into the content and structure of . . . school curricula in various advanced industrial nations that consistently do better than the United States on *international comparisons of educational achievement* (for example, France, Japan, Sweden, West Germany)."[9]

Note how these various ways of defining common learnings reflect the wide swings in the way both educators and the general public view the purposes of schools. Although these proposals have much in common, it is easy to see why we are far from a consensus on what schools should teach and what students should learn.

HOW *SHOULD* COMMON LEARNINGS BE DETERMINED?

Throughout his long and distinguished career, William Van Til has convincingly argued for a better way to determine common learnings: a balanced consideration of *all* the foundations or sources of curriculum. In his autobiography he named some of those whose ideas contributed to his understanding of each source.[10] These included Boyd Bode, William Heard Kilpatrick, and John Dewey on philosophical foundations; Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba, Henry Harap, and Hollis Caswell on social foundations; and Harold Alberty and V. T. Thayer on the psychological foundations.

In his 1946 doctoral dissertation at Ohio State University, Van Til proposed "A Social Living Curriculum for Postwar Secondary Education: An Approach to Curriculum Development Through Centers of Experience Derived from the Interaction of Values, Social Realities, and Needs."[11] From then on, balanced attention to "needs, values, and social realities" has been at the core of William Van Til's curriculum theory. In the 1953 yearbook that he edited for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, he asserted that all three sources for the content of the curriculum must be "rec-

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[8]E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[9]*Core Knowledge: The Common Ground for Uncommon Success* (Charlottesville, VA: Core Knowledge Foundation, 1994), p. 5 (emphasis added).

[10]William Van Til, *My Way of Looking at It,* 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Caddo Gap Press, 1996).

[11]William Van Til, "A Social Living Curriculum for Post-War Secondary Education: An Approach to Curriculum Development Through Centers of Experience Derived from the Interaction of Values, Social Realities, and Needs" (doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1946).

onciled."[12] Van Til's contribution to the 1962 ASCD monograph *What Are the Sources of the Curriculum?*[13] again called attention to social *and* psychological *and* philosophical foundations, as did *Issues in Secondary Education,* a yearbook he edited in 1976 for the National Society for the Study of Education.[14]

Separate chapters on social realities, the personal-social needs of early adolescents, and democratic values made up the section entitled "Foundations of Junior High School Education" that he wrote for the 1961 and 1967 editions of *Modern Education for the Junior High School Years.*[15] I was honored to be invited by Dr. Van Til to join him in writing this book, along with another of his former doctoral students, John H. Lounsbury.

Of course, Van Til is not the only one to put forth this conception. For example, Tanner and Tanner list society, knowledge, and the learner as "curricular sources and influences."[16] In his exploration of "foundations of the curriculum," Zais devotes separate chapters to philosophy, society and culture, the individual, and learning theory.[17] But Van Til's insistence on the simultaneous and balanced consideration of all curriculum foundations offers a powerful antidote to our society's tendency to become preoccupied with first one, then another.

A Tripod Analogy

In my own efforts to help graduate students of curriculum to visualize this interactive approach, I have found the tripod to be a useful analogy. Anyone can see immediately that whenever any leg is longer or shorter than the others, the tripod is tipped and unstable. Likewise, whenever any of the three curriculum foundations—social, philosophical, or psychological—is either overemphasized or neglected, the curriculum is out of balance. For convenience I divide

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[12]Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *Forces Affecting American Education, 1953 Yearbook* (Alexandria, VA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1953).

[13]Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *What Are the Sources of the Curriculum?* (Alexandria, VA: The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1962).

[14]William Van Til, ed., *Issues in Secondary Education. The Seventy-Fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

[15]William Van Til, Gordon F. Vars, and John H. Lounsbury, *Modern Education for the Junior High School Years* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961, 1967).

[16]Daniel Tanner and Laurel N. Tanner, *Curriculum Development: Theory into Practice* (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

[17]Robert S. Zais, *Curriculum Principles and Foundations* (New York: Crowell, 1976).

each foundation area into two subcategories, any one of which can unbalance the curriculum if it is overemphasized. Of course, everything in human life and culture is interconnected, so all of these categories overlap, and the subdivisions are somewhat arbitrary.

Here is how I conceptualize curriculum foundations:

- *Social foundations,* made up of
  - social realities, which include the characteristics and problems of current society and also society's expectations of its schools; and
  - the academic disciplines, represented by scholars in the universities and also, to some extent, by the professional associations of teachers of a particular subject, such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics.
- *Philosophical foundations,* made up of
  - the purposes of education, as defined by individual philosophers like Plato or John Dewey or by groups formed to address philosophical issues, such as the Educational Policies Commission of the National Education Association; and
  - values, with special emphasis in our culture on democratic values.
- *Psychological foundations,* made up of
  - the characteristics, needs, problems, concerns, and aspirations of learners, both as individuals and as groups; and
  - learning theory, which is being profoundly altered these days as we probe even more deeply into the workings of the human brain-body system.

Unfortunately, most human beings seem incapable of keeping three ideas in mind at the same time, let alone six. Instead of the balanced approach to determining common learnings, the public schools are driven first one way, then another. Now they are being assaulted by society's accountability juggernaut, pushing adult-determined standards and enforcing them through high-stakes, state-mandated tests. For example, in Ohio, 4th graders must pass the state tests in order to be promoted to 5th grade. The idiocy of reliance on paper-and-pencil tests was demonstrated recently when I discovered that two of the three sample mathematics questions provided by the test-makers were so ambiguous as to be unsolvable!

I fear that education will continue to be subject to wild swings in emphasis until more of us understand, accept, and put into practice William Van Til's admonition to consider simultaneously (1) the learner and how he or she learns, *and* (2) the characteristics and expectations of society, including the scholars of the disciplines, *and*

(3) the purposes of education in our society, including both the values and processes of democracy.

WHAT PROPORTION OF THE CURRICULUM SHOULD BE DEVOTED TO COMMON LEARNINGS?

Balance also is essential as educators consider what proportion of the curriculum should be devoted to common learnings (required of all students) as opposed to "specialized" (optional or elective) educational opportunities. The latter term is not to be confused with "special education" for students whose handicaps or exceptional abilities call for extra effort to meet their educational needs, either within the regular classroom or elsewhere.

In the 1940s, the Educational Policies Commission addressed the proportion question in its two influential monographs: *Education for All American Youth,* published in 1944 and revised in 1952, and *Education for All American Children,* published in 1948.[18] These books depicted educational programs in two hypothetical communities some 20 years in the future. Common learnings made up virtually the entire curriculum at the elementary and junior high levels, with increasing amounts of school time devoted to "individual interests" and "vocational preparation" in senior high school and in the first two years of college. This pattern has been evident for many years in state education department regulations and guidelines.

A similar tapering off of the amount of time devoted to common learnings appears in the basic curriculum model proposed in 1996 by Edling and Loring for the Center for Occupational Research and Development (CORD) in Waco, Texas.[19] In their Integrated System for Workforce Education Curricula, "Academic Foundations plus Career Information/Exploration" make up the entire K–8 curriculum. In grade 9 the time devoted to a "Core of Basic Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes" begins to diminish to allow more time for "Broad Technical and Application Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes" and "Specialized Technical and Application Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes."

In recent years the "back to basics" and mandated standards movements, combined with reduced public support for education, have caused schools to limit electives and free-choice activities, es-

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[18]Educational Policies Commission, *Education for All American Youth* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1944); *Education for All American Youth: A Further Look* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1952); *Education for All American Children* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1948).

[19]Walter H. Edling and Ruth M. Loring, *Education and Work: Designing Integrated Curricula* (Waco, TX: Center for Occupational Research and Development, 1996).

pecially in elementary and middle schools. For example, a few years ago the state of Ohio reduced the total amount of time that middle schools were required to devote to instruction in art, music, industrial arts, and home economics. Courses in industrial arts and home economics were especially hard hit, because they were not specifically listed as required by the state. Student activities programs that offer a wide array of free-choice learning experiences have suffered a similar fate, except for high-profile public entertainment activities like interscholastic sports, marching bands, or show choirs.

In the final analysis, the proportion of the curriculum to be devoted to common learnings usually is determined by a political process and therefore is subject to the same shifts in public opinion that govern other aspects of education. Here, again, a balanced attention to social realities, student needs, and democratic values might save some of the enriching courses and activities that are being forced out of the curriculum by pressure for traditional academic achievement.

WHAT CURRICULUM DESIGN IS BEST FOR DELIVERING COMMON LEARNINGS?

The most prevalent way of ensuring that common learnings are taught is to require certain courses or to specify the number of minutes of instruction that must be devoted to a particular subject. For example, the state may require elementary schools to spend a certain number of minutes each day or week on reading, a certain number on arithmetic, and so on. In middle schools and high schools, common requirements usually are specified in terms of the courses all students must take at each grade level. In high school the yearly number of hours of exposure to a particular subject is translated into credits or "Carnegie units" applicable toward graduation. This departmentalized curriculum design is so ubiquitous as to seem ordained by some higher power.

In the late 1800s, alternative interdisciplinary approaches were proposed by John Dewey and others in what came to be known as the progressive education movement.[20] They argued that common learnings should be taught by engaging students in studying questions, problems, and issues that the students themselves find meaningful, regardless of what subjects or disciplines might be involved. The Eight Year Study of the Progressive Education Association was designed to evaluate this approach. In 1998 the National Middle

[20]Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876–1957* (New York: Random House, 1961); Angela E. Fraley, *Schooling and Innovation: The Rhetoric and the Reality* (New York: Tyler Gibson, 1981).

School Association revisited this study to determine its implications for middle-level education today,[21] and the National High School Association asked me to do the same thing for high schools.[22]

Core Curriculum

The interdisciplinary curriculum design developed by the more innovative schools in the Eight Year Study came to be called "core curriculum." I was introduced to this concept by Hilda Wallace Hughes, my first education professor at Antioch College in 1946, and I have been teaching, advocating, and writing about it ever since.[23] I continued my study of the core idea with Harold Alberty at Ohio State University. I also spent much time observing classes and talking with teachers at the Ohio State University School, where Dr. Alberty had been the director and Dr. Van Til had been a core teacher. Harold Alberty helped me get my first teaching position as a core teacher in Harford County, Maryland. I went from there to George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, where William Van Til became my doctoral advisor. It was almost as if fate had directed me from Hughes to Alberty to Van Til! The rest, as they say, is history.

This is not the place for a detailed examination of the definition, rationale, and pros and cons of using a problem-centered core curriculum as a vehicle to deliver common learnings. In brief, core curriculum, as I interpret and teach it, is a curriculum design in which teachers and students jointly plan, carry out, and evaluate learning experiences focused on problems or issues of genuine significance both to learners and to society, and also consonant with the purposes of education in a democratic society. I have been writing about core curriculum ever since my first article on that topic, "Problems of a Beginning Core Teacher," was published in *Educational Leadership* in 1951.[24] I am encouraged that Robert V. Bullough Jr. recently has rediscovered Alberty's core concepts and applied them in working with public high school teachers in Utah.[25]

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[21]National Middle School Association, *The Eight Year Study Revisited: Lessons from the Past for the Present* (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1998).

[22]Gordon F. Vars, "Another Look Back at Tomorrow's High School, Part One: Implications for High School Curriculum from the Eight-Year Study," *Voices from the Field* 2 (Fall 1999): 27–34.

[23]Daniel Dyer, "Gordon F. Vars: The Heart and Soul of Core Curriculum," *Middle School Journal* 24 (January 1993): 30–38.

[24]Gordon F. Vars, "Problems of a Beginning Core Teacher," *Educational Leadership* 9 (November 1951): 12–16.

[25]Robert V. Bullough Jr., "Past Solutions to Current Problems in Curriculum Integration: The Contributions of Harold Alberty," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 14 (Winter 1999): 156–170.

In his doctoral dissertation, William Van Til proposed 16 "clusters of content" or "centers of experience" that were "derived from the interaction of values, social realities, and needs." These "centers" were intended to provide balanced scope and sequence for common learnings in grades 7 through 12.[26] Structuring the common learnings curriculum around a set of interdisciplinary "problem areas" or "centers of experience" was the approach developed by Harold Alberty and other curriculum consultants involved in the Eight Year Study.[27] The core program at the Ohio State University School was organized in this way, and so was the core program in Harford County, Maryland, where Dr. Alberty had served as a consultant and where I began my teaching. The problem area concept was a key element of the core program in Prince George's County, Maryland, where the supervisor of the core program was Lucille L. Lurry, another of Dr. Alberty's doctoral students. In 1957 she and Elsie J. Alberty wrote one of the most comprehensive accounts of how to go about *Developing a High School Core Program.*[28]

James Beane uses the more generic term "theme" for the organizing centers that he proposes for integrative curriculum.[29] He derives the organizing center from the intersections of students' personal concerns and society's problems, thus drawing on both psychological and social foundations. He embeds the whole process in a matrix of democratic values, thus incorporating philosophical foundations. Unfortunately, many teachers think they are doing "thematic teaching" when they organize curriculum and instruction around conventional chunks of subject matter like "Flight" or "The Middle Ages." Too often, "topics" like these are neither grounded in student needs, values, and social realities, as Van Til advocates, nor derived in the manner James Beane recommends.

Other advocates of interdisciplinary curriculum, such as Jacobs and Erickson, give insufficient attention to the needs, problems, and

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[26]William Van Til, "A Social Living Curriculum for Post-War Secondary Education: An Approach to Curriculum Development Through Centers of Experience Derived from the Interaction of Values, Social Realities, and Needs" (doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1946).

[27]Harold B. Alberty, *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

[28]Lucille L. Lurry and Elsie J. Alberty, *Developing a High School Core Program* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

[29]James A. Beane, *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality* (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1990, 1993); James A. Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

concerns of students.[30] They also seem unwilling to invite students to participate directly in the curriculum-planning process. Hence, I continue to argue for building common learnings around "problem areas" or "centers of experience" because of the curriculum design process they connote.[31]

Three Waves

In my professional career I have lived through three waves of popular interest in interdisciplinary or integrative programs of various types. I entered the profession near the end of the first wave, the progressive education era. While at Antioch I spent a term visiting schools in the Midwest that had participated in the Eight Year Study to see if they still were carrying on in the progressive tradition. Few of them were, with the notable exception of the Ohio State University School.

That wave was overwhelmed by the post-*Sputnik* efforts to improve education by focusing the curriculum on the academic disciplines. Remember the "new math"? BSCS biology? PSSC physics? The federally funded curriculum improvement projects of that period almost always were limited to one specific academic discipline, such as physics or geography. However, a few, such as the Minnesota Mathematics and Science Teaching Project (MINNEMAST) and USMES (Unified Science and Mathematics for Elementary Schools), did explore linkages between two closely related disciplines. You may recall that the intent of these curriculum reforms was to encourage students to think "like a physicist" or "like a historian" in order to discover the "structure" and "modes of inquiry" of each discipline. This strong disciplinary emphasis was clearly antithetical to the interdisciplinary approach, and so many block-time and core programs were split into separate subjects.

Interestingly, in 1971, almost 10 years later, Bruner "recanted" his strong advocacy of the disciplines approach.[32] Addressing the annual conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, he called for more attention to the needs of students

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[30]Heidi Hayes Jacobs, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989); H. Lynn Erickson, *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1998).

[31]Gordon F. Vars, "Another Look Back at Tomorrow's High School, Part Two: Lessons from the Eight-Year Study for High-School Methods, Guidance Assessment, and the Change Process," *Voices from the Field* 2 (Spring/Summer 2000): 4–11.

[32]Jerome S. Bruner, "The Process of Education Revisited," *Phi Delta Kappan* 53 (September 1971): 18–21.

and to the problems of society. Bruner admitted that leaders of the disciplines movement had taken student motivation for granted and did not think sufficiently about "mutuality" (human relations), the diversity of society, and the politics of education. Would that Bruner's wise insights could be imparted to those imposing today's test-driven curriculum reform. Bruner's concluding paragraphs have almost the ring of progressive education:

> If I had my choice now, in terms of a curriculum project for the seventies, it would be to find a means whereby we could bring society back to its sense of values and priorities in life. *I believe I would be quite satisfied to declare, if not a moratorium, then something of a de-emphasis on matters that have to do with the structure of history, the structure of physics, the nature of mathematical consistency, and deal with it rather in the context of the problems that face us.* We might better concern ourselves with how these [social] problems can be solved, not just by practical action, but by putting knowledge, wherever we find it and in whatever form we find it, to work in these massive tasks. *We might put vocation and intention back into the process of education much more firmly than we had it there before.*
>
> A decade later, we realize that *The Process of Education* was the beginning of a revolution, and one cannot yet know how far it will go. Reform of curriculum is not enough. Reform of the school is probably not enough. The issue is one of man's capacity for creating a culture, society, and technology that not only feed him but keep him caring and belonging.[33]

The second wave of interest in student-centered interdisciplinary curriculum was more like a ripple, because it came and went without making much impact on the schools. I refer to the revival of concern for the needs of students that was sparked by the people William Van Til in 1974 called "The Compassionate Critics."[34] These included people such as John Holt, Herbert Kohl, Jonathan Kozol, George Dennison, and James Herndon. Some of the "free schools" and other alternatives created at that time have survived to the present, and a few have been reincarnated as "charter schools." It was during this time, in 1973, that the National Association for Core Curriculum (NACC) developed its basic position paper, *Core Today: Rationale and Implications*.[35] It succinctly summarizes the progressive philosophy underlying core curriculum and states its implications in the form of a self-rating checklist for use in faculty professional development.

This brief second wave was washed out by the "back to basics" movement epitomized by the infamous *Nation at Risk* report of

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[33]Ibid.: 21.

[34]William Van Til, ed., *Curriculum: Quest for Relevance* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971, 1974).

[35]National Association for Core Curriculum, *Core Today: Rationale and Implications* (Kent, OH: National Association for Core Curriculum, 1973, 1980, 1985).

1983. Michael Apple has called this the "Conservative Restoration," and it is still going on. Whereas in the post-*Sputnik* era the schools were supposed to get tough so we could beat the Russians in the space race, this time the goal was to strengthen the schools so that their graduates could beat the Japanese and the Europeans economically. This thrust has increased the top-down demands for accountability mentioned earlier. State mandates nearly always are organized by conventional subject areas. And too often they call for recall of the minutiae of academic disciplines, rather than demonstrated competence in common learnings such as critical thinking.

Rare indeed is a state like Connecticut, which at one time had both disciplinary and interdisciplinary standards, although you can be sure most attention was paid to student performance on the traditional basics. Vermont's *Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities* uses the term "vital results" for standards that "cut across all fields of knowledge."[36] These are arranged in four categories: communication, reasoning and problem solving, personal development, and civic/social responsibility. The "How-to-Guide for Using Vermont's Framework" is entitled *Core Connections,* and it includes suggestions on how to build curriculum and instruction around "student questions, issues, and concerns."[37] But the main message of the standards and accountability movement is that students must master specific content in order to pass the state tests.

Remarkably, in the midst of all this pressure on schools, teachers, and students, there arose the third wave of interest in interdisciplinary ways of providing common learnings, especially at the middle school level. I give most of the credit for this to James Beane and his cogent arguments for curriculum integration. The first edition of his influential monograph, *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality,* was published by the National Middle School Association in 1990.[38] This was three years after the first edition of my little NMSA monograph, *Interdisciplinary Teaching in the Middle Grades: Why and How,* and one year after Heidi Hayes Jacobs's monograph for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation.*[39]

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[36]Vermont State Board of Education, *Vermont's Framework of Standards and Learning Opportunities* (Burlington: Vermont State Board of Education, 1996).

[37]Vermont State Board of Education, *Core Connections: A How-To Guide for Using Vermont's Framework* (Burlington: Vermont State Board of Education, 1996).

[38]James A. Beane, *A Middle School Curriculum: From Rhetoric to Reality* (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1990).

[39]Gordon F. Vars, *Interdisciplinary Teaching in the Middle Grades: Why and How* (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1987); Heidi Hayes Jacobs, *Interdisciplinary Curriculum: Design and Implementation* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1989).

There followed a virtual flood of books and monographs on interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction. NACC distributes a list of "Recent Books on Integrative/Interdisciplinary Curriculum (Published Since 1990)."[40] The list had 72 titles as of February 2000, with several more waiting to be added. They cover the gamut—early childhood, middle school, high school, and college—although most are aimed at the middle level. It is my observation that the number of full-length books on this topic published within the last decade far exceeds that of any previous decade, even during the heyday of the progressive education movement. It is true that only a few of these publications advocate developing curriculum through democratic teacher-student planning, the essence of the core approach. However, there are a number of case studies of school programs that could very well meet the criteria for core curriculum set forth in 1973 by the National Association for Core Curriculum.

Even more astonishing, considering the decades of core teachers' complaints about the lack of instructional materials on interdisciplinary topics, is the number of textbook publishers who now offer unit teaching guides and materials. Interdisciplinary units also are available on the Internet. Here are three examples of comprehensive series of units for the middle level:

- D. C. Heath and Company has a series of 12 "I-Witness Interdisciplinary Units," based on units actually taught by middle-level teaching teams. Each unit has a Teacher's Team Planning Guide and a Student Project Book.
- Prentice-Hall goes even further with its series called "Interdisciplinary Explorations." They offer a Team Planning Guide, Explorer's [student] Guide Book, and a Supplementary Reader for each of 15 units.
- In Canada, McGraw-Hill-Ryerson, Ltd., publishes the "Issues Collection," a set of 12 paperback anthologies of readings on issues significant to young adolescents in middle and junior high schools. The Teacher's Guides for this series come closest to the core ideal of involving students in shaping the study, and they point out how the issue connects with nearly all subjects in the curriculum.

In addition, a variety of sources offer interactive computer simulations and multimedia kits built around videotapes that are appropriate for interdisciplinary units. Never before have teachers who want to do interdisciplinary teaching had such a wealth of attractive materials available. Unfortunately, many school districts cannot af-

[40]National Association for Core Curriculum, 1640 Franklin Avenue, Suite #104, Kent, OH 44240-4324.

ford to buy them, and even if they do, teachers wedded to the textbook or teaching to a test may not use them.

How can we account for this flowering of interdisciplinary education amidst the desert of state-mandated proficiency testing? James Beane attributes it in part to educators' all too prevalent tendency to latch on to any educational "gimmick" that promises to make learning "fun" for both students and teachers.[41] There is no doubt that students are more highly motivated when they practice writing skills and study history by interviewing people in their own community and writing about them for publication, as in the powerful "Foxfire" approach pioneered by Eliot Wigginton.[42] But many teachers see interdisciplinary instruction as a technique or method, not as a fundamentally different way to conceptualize and carry out curriculum and instruction. Too often this has resulted in units of study like "Chocolate" or "Dinosaurs" that are cute and fun but may neither teach fundamental concepts nor address the very real personal and social problems that confront human beings today.

I see signs that this third wave is rapidly coming to a close as states toughen their demands for accountability. Recently I attended a workshop in which a teacher described an exciting project that she had carried out with her students, investigating a stream pollution problem near the school. One of the teachers in the audience said, "I could never do that, because I have to teach the proficiencies"! Unfortunately there are too many teachers like this one, who see the situation as "either-or" rather than "both-and."

I do not expect to live to see the next curriculum integration wave. It will be up to the younger generation of educators and thoughtful leaders like James Beane to keep the idea alive until the "movers and shakers" in education come to their senses. I long for the day when people will realize that the top-down, departmentalized, piecemeal approach to providing common learnings is undemocratic, contrary to the way the brain works, and ignores pressing social realities. Nothing we learn is really functional until and unless we integrate it into our total personal-social being, so to me it just makes sense to provide those learnings within an integrative context.

"Integrative Standards"

A few signs indicate that the standards movement is not completely antithetical to curriculum integration. For example, the Al-

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[41]James A. Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

[42]Eliot Wigginton, *Sometimes a Shining Moment: The Foxfire Experience* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985).

liance for Curriculum Reform (ACR) and the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) have retooled the evaluative criteria used for school accreditation to give more attention to student performance.[43] In the process, they examined the proposals of the various academic professional organizations and identified goals that are common across several specific subject standards. Those common learnings, called "Schoolwide Goals for Student Learning," are divided into the following categories: Learning-to-Learn Skills, Expanding and Integrating Knowledge, Communication Skills, Thinking and Reasoning Skills, Interpersonal Skills, and Personal and Social Responsibility.

The rubrics suggested for evaluating student performance in each of these areas are stated in general terms. However, their examples of "performance indicators" are "discipline-based"; that is, they are divided into the conventional subjects such as mathematics or social studies; so are the *Program Evaluation Guides* that are to be used for evaluating specific school programs or services. Thus the structure of the handbooks runs counter to their avowed goal of helping schools to make sure "that their instructional and assessment efforts contribute to a coherent curriculum."[44]

An even more comprehensive approach has been used by the Center for Occupational Research and Development.[45] They identified common learnings embedded in standards proposed by academic organizations and also by groups advocating "workforce education"—businesses, industries, and vocational educators. Tapping the power of computer technology, they created a database of 38 sets of proposed standards. From these they pulled out 53 "core" standards, similar to the schoolwide goals proposed by the National Study of School Evaluation. These describe a broad array of competencies, everything from "general housekeeping" to statistical analysis and computer literacy to ethics and self-concept.

What CORD calls "integrated standards" also have been generated for various occupational fields such as business, engineering, the arts, and service. Field tests of this approach to both common learnings and integrated curriculum are going on in 12 states, and 14 curriculum packages are being developed to help school personnel implement the process.[46]

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[43]Kathleen A. Fitzpatrick, *Indicators of Schools of Quality. Volume 1: Schoolwide Indicators of Quality* (Schaumburg, IL: National Study of School Evaluation, 1997).

[44]Ibid., p. xi.

[45]Walter H. Edling and Ruth M. Loring, *Education and Work: Designing Integrated Curricula* (Waco, TX: Center for Occupational Research and Development, 1996).

[46]Ruth M. Loring, personal communication, April 1999.

Researchers at McREL, a regional educational research center in Aurora, Colorado, also began their search for "essential knowledge" by building a standards database incorporating 116 national standards documents in 14 content areas.[47] In the process they identified a set of "life skills," which they describe as "a category of knowledge that is useful across content areas as well as important for the world of work." These are divided into four areas: Thinking and Reasoning, Working with Others, Self-Regulation, and Life Work.[48] Note the similarity to the "schoolwide goals" of NSSE/ACR and the "integrated standards" of CORD.

Any set of these standards-based common learnings, or, better yet, a composite of all three, would give K–12 schools an excellent checklist to use in curriculum planning. Posted throughout the school or district and incorporated in all courses and activities, such a list would give schools a consistency of objectives that would profoundly improve their effectiveness. It would be even better if students were invited to consider these societal expectations as they and their teachers design specific learning experiences through democratic teacher-student planning. Thus, student needs and concerns, societal expectations, and democratic values could all be addressed.

What about the other subject-matter standards? McREL research also documented the utter futility of trying to teach all of the standards set forth by professional associations and other groups. They conclude:

> A high school diploma would require as much classroom time as has historically resulted in a master's or professional degree. Even the brightest students would need nine additional years of schooling to master the nearly 4,000 benchmarks experts have set in 14 subject areas.[49]

McREL researchers are now trying to winnow out less important standards by applying the criterion of "significance of content" rather than "familiarity to literate people," the criterion used by E. D. Hirsch and others. Unfortunately, McREL is relying on "what subject-matter experts know to be valuable in their respective domains," an approach that has resulted in the overblown lists we have already! Some have predicted that the entire standards movement will collapse of its own weight, and then there may be a chance to rebuild the educational enterprise, giving balanced attention to all three cur-

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[47]Robert J. Marzano, John S. Kendall, and Barbara B. Gaddy, "Deciding on 'Essential Knowledge'," *Education Week,* 21 April 1999, pp. 68, 49.

[48]John S. Kendall and Robert J. Marzano, *Content Knowledge: A Compendium of Standards and Benchmarks for K–12 Educators* (available online at www.mcrel.org).

[49]Robert J. Marzano, John S. Kendall, and Barbara B. Gaddy, "Deciding on 'Essential Knowledge'," *Education Week,* 21 April 1999, p. 68.

riculum foundations. But in the meantime, consider the damage being done to students, teachers, and the whole of society!

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE CORE CURRICULUM IN PROVIDING COMMON LEARNINGS?

How do we know that the core curriculum is any better than the traditional departmentalized curriculum for providing common learnings? One source of evidence is the Eight Year Study of the Progressive Education Association, probably the most extensive long-range study of educational outcomes ever carried out. Conducted from 1932 to 1940, it was summarized in a series of books, beginning with Wilford Aikin's *Story of the Eight Year Study* in 1942.[50] It concluded that graduates of the 29 experimental secondary schools did as well or better in college than similar students at the same college who came through more conventional programs. Moreover, graduates of schools with more innovative programs, like the Ohio State University School, which used the core curriculum approach, did markedly better than those from other experimental schools where changes were more modest.

John Mickelson summarized research on the effectiveness of core curriculum in 1957, Harold Alberty in 1960, and Grace Wright in 1956 and 1963 for the U.S. Office of Education.[51] To my knowledge there were no other comprehensive reviews of the effectiveness of interdisciplinary curriculum and instruction until mine in 1996, in which I examined more than 100 studies.[52] Academic achievement in interdisciplinary team-teaching programs was summarized by Armstrong in 1977, Cotton in 1982, and Arhar, Johnston, and Markle in 1992.[53] The overall conclusion from all of these reviews is that, al-

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[50]Wilford Aikin, *The Story of the Eight Year Study* (New York: Harper, 1942).

[51]John M. Mickelson, "What Does Research Say About the Effectiveness of the Core Curriculum?" *School Review* 65 (Summer 1957): 144–160; Harold B. Alberty, "Core Programs," in *Encyclopedia of Educational Research,* 3rd ed., ed. C. W. Harris (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 337–341; Grace S. Wright, *The Core Program: Abstracts of Unpublished Research, 1946–1955,* U.S. Office of Education Circular No. 485 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1956); Grace S. Wright, *The Core Program: Unpublished Research, 1956–1962,* U.S. Office of Education Circular No. 713 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1963).

[52]Gordon F. Vars, "Effects of Interdisciplinary Curriculum and Instruction," in *Annual Review of Research for School Leaders,* ed. Peter S. Hlebowitsh and William G. Wraga (Jefferson City, MO: Scholastic, 1996), pp. 147–164.

[53]David G. Armstrong, "Team Teaching and Academic Achievement," *Review of Educational Research* 47 (1977): 65–86; Kathleen Cotton, "Effects of Interdisciplinary Team Teaching: Research Synthesis" (Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Lab, 1982), ED 230 533; Joanne M. Arhar, J. Howard Johnston, and Glenn E. Markle, "The Effects of Teaming on Students," in *Connecting the Curriculum Through Interdisciplinary Instruction,* ed. John H. Lounsbury (Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association, 1992), pp. 23–35.

most without exception, students in any type of interdisciplinary program achieve as well as, and often better than, those in conventional departmentalized programs.

Many factors make research of this kind very difficult and complicate the task of trying to summarize it. Interdisciplinary programs bear many different names, and their titles sometimes do not accurately reflect what actually goes on in the classroom. Even if a school or college is clear about what kind of curriculum design it is trying to carry out, the degree of implementation varies from classroom to classroom according to the commitment and skill of the instructors.

Assessment in education is difficult, at best, and especially so for something as complex as common learnings. Simple paper-and-pencil tests of factual knowledge or basic skills reveal little about such outcomes as commitment to democratic values, cooperative negotiating skills, critical thinking, and willingness to address social issues. Needed are more authentic assessment procedures and sophisticated research tools to process the data such assessments generate. Too often overlooked is the problem of experimenter bias, especially since no school or college wants to publish research that casts doubt on any of its programs! Even studies conducted by researchers from outside the institution are not free from suspicion. After all, researchers who were not at least mildly interested in the innovative program would be unlikely to exert the effort to study it. Despite all these factors, the mass of evidence on precollege programs is impressive and reassuring.

I continue to gather all available evidence on this question, maintaining and publishing for the National Association for Core Curriculum a "Bibliography of Research on the Effectiveness of Block-Time, Core, and Interdisciplinary Team Teaching Programs." Our latest edition lists 200 studies, with more waiting to be added. Although NACC promotes integrative curriculum at all levels, elementary through college, most studies have been carried out at the middle level.

Now I am working with the Association for Integrative Studies (AIS) on a nationwide effort to gather further evidence of the effectiveness of interdisciplinary programs at the college level. Even though the progressive education movement stimulated the development of interdisciplinary programs in some colleges and universities as long ago as the 1940s, solid research on their effectiveness is scarce. One of the few exceptions is the periodic assessment of the core program at St. Joseph's College in Rensselaer, Indiana, conducted since 1980 by John Nichols, the program coordinator.[54] Any-

[54]John P. Nichols, "A Study of the Core Curriculum at Saint Joseph's College, Rensselaer, Indiana, 9/1/79–1/31/81" (Rensselaer, IN: St. Joseph's College, 1980); John P. Nichols, "Assessment 1996–1997: The Core Program, St. Joseph's College, Rensselaer, IN" (Rensselaer, IN: St. Joseph's College, 1997).

one who knows of any evidence, published or unpublished, on the effectiveness of any kind of interdisciplinary program is urged to contact the NACC office and join in this important undertaking.

CONCLUSION

In this brief review of my continuing quest for common learnings, I have acknowledged my debt to a few of the educators who have had a profound influence on my professional career. Harold Alberty nurtured the interest in integrative core curriculum that had been stimulated by my experiences at Antioch College, and he got me my first core teaching position. William Van Til cultivated this interest and grounded it in sound curriculum theory. He also paved the way for my active participation in important professional associations and guided my development as a writer on educational issues.

My own professional experience has led me to two major propositions. First, education in and for a democratic society must be solidly grounded in a *balanced* consideration of *all* curriculum foundations—psychological, social, and philosophical. Second, the evidence points to a problem-centered core curriculum as the design that best draws on those foundations to provide common learnings for all young people.

I have enjoyed a very rewarding career in education—demonstrating, teaching, and writing about these ideas. I invite educators at all levels to consider them in the continuing struggle to provide our citizens with the common learnings they must have to survive and thrive in our complex world.

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