

# Gordon F. Vars:

## The heart and soul of core curriculum

Daniel Dyer

"Holy smoke!" cries the teacher. "Let's get outta here!"

Ninth grade heads swing toward the ventilation grate where smoke is, indeed, billowing through the duct-work—thick acrid clouds surging into the ninth grade science classroom of Henry Frazer, a teacher whose wit under fire has impressed one young scholar in the room as he joins his classmates in an orderly evacuation of the building.

Fire that day guts the school where Henry Frazer teaches and where Gordon Vars is making his way through that stage of life which would one day be his specialty. It would not be the last school fire Gordon would experience.

I have known Gordon Vars for more than twenty years. Although I first met him on the printed page (*Modern Education for the Junior High School Years* was a volume I cherished before I knew him), it was not until I became his graduate assistant and doctoral student at Kent State University in the early 1970s that I grew to appreciate him as a person and to admire how he was able at all times to employ his scholarship in

the service of humanity. He seemed always more eager to learn than to teach.

Like most graduate students, I was impecunious. Proud of what I knew, disdainful of what I did not. One afternoon I remember commenting to Gordon in an offhand way that the local PBS station was broadcasting Eisenstein's classic film *Ivan the Terrible Part I* (a film I longed to see); I complained mildly that my poor, not-good-enough-for-Goodwill set made every PBS program look as if it had been photographed through a dandruff-encrusted lens. Gordon had a few questions about Eisenstein—eagerly mining my brain for what little ore it possessed. Then the conversation moved elsewhere.

I promptly forgot the entire conversation. Gordon did not. Later that afternoon the phone rang. Gordon. Would my wife and I join him at home to see *Ivan*? Would we!

When we arrived, we were greeted with Gordon's usual good cheer—and with bowls brimming with popcorn. I was stunned by his thoughtfulness, charmed by his goodness. It would not be the last time.

### The best and worst of public education

Born on February 10, 1923, in Erie, Pennsylvania, son of Mildred and Ethan W. Vars (a tool designer and engineer), Gordon soon moved to Bellefonte, a small community in the Allegheny Mountains and seat of a county aptly named Centre (it occupies the heart of the Keystone State). "Limestone dust from the nearby kilns powdered the town," recalls Gordon.

In the Bellefonte High School Gordon experienced the best and the worst of American public education. He remembers Alberta Krader, a "marvelous teacher" of sixth grade music who revealed to him the wonders of classical music. She took him to his first symphonic performance, at nearby Penn State, where he heard the National Symphony, under the baton of Hans Kindler, play Beethoven's *Overture to Egmont*, an experience which Gordon recalls "swept me off my feet." Although Gordon's mother probably initiated his life-long love of music, Gordon credits Ms. Krader with introducing him to the power and passion of it.

In this same school, however, Gordon was to witness events which alarmed and frightened him. One day an eighth grade English teacher—patrolling the aisles like a prison guard—detected a young man in the surreptitious (and seditious!) act of reading a novel. Gordon recalls with horror how she grabbed the book away from the offender and slammed him in the face with it. One can only wonder what she intended to teach that day; we do not have to imagine what the students learned.

In ninth grade, the school burned, and the entire student population moved into an abandoned academy building where Gordon completed the year in dark classrooms and narrow hallways haunted by the spirits of long-departed scholars from the nineteenth century.

### An aeronautical engineer becomes an educator

Gordon's high school graduation present was an automobile excursion to the West coast with his father in their 1939 DeSoto. Along the way, they stopped in Yellow Springs, Ohio to look at the campus of Antioch College, a school whose innovative curriculum had already attracted Gordon, who now was resolved to be an aeronautical engineer. "It was the combination of a liberal arts education with practical pre-engineering experiences," says Gordon, explaining his decision to matriculate at Antioch.

The school's "co-op plan" permitted students to combine classroom and workplace in

alternating blocks of time. Students would attend classes on campus for a period of time, then leave campus to serve apprenticeships in their areas of interest. The plan enabled Gordon to work as a machinist for Allison Motors, which manufactured engines for P-38 aircraft, and as a draftsman for Schweitzer Aircraft, an Elmira, New York company specializing in training gliders.

1941. World events caught up with Gordon, and Uncle Sam sent him to Alabama for basic training, then to Germany where he fought the Nazis on their own soil. In a variety of infantry units, Gordon served in several different capacities: as a BAR man, a radio operator, and, during the days following V.E. Day, a clerk-typist in Nuremberg for military courts martial. While in Nuremberg, he was able to attend in his off-duty hours some of the sessions of the War Crimes Trials and to see those horrible Nazi executioners he now calls "lunatics."

"In the foxholes I had time to think. And it was then that I decided I'd rather work with people and ideas than with things."

And so the world would lose another aeronautical engineer ("I wasn't much good at it anyway," Gordon laughs) but would gain an educator whose contributions to the profession would be immeasurable.

Back in Yellow Springs, Gordon enrolled in education courses and recalls with great fondness and admiration Hilda Wallace Hughes ("She was very influential in my career," he says), who insisted that her students design the course (which covered all the traditional topics of first-year education: principles of teaching, educational psychology, and the role of the school in society). Gordon believes Hughes' approach was the "first step" in his development as an advocate of "core" and other interdisciplinary approaches to the curriculum.

Gordon also continued his long involvement with Boy Scouts while in Yellow Springs. He had been a Scout himself and now lent his considerable experience and talents to these southern Ohio youngsters.

Student teaching in the Yellow Springs schools (ninth grade general science). A day of observation. Gordon's college supervisor and cooperating teacher, pens busy writing comments, sit in the rear of the room. Things are going well. Better than well, actually. Gordon is delivering a virtuoso classroom performance!

The period ends, and Gordon, whose eyes have been affixed to his lesson plan the past half



hour, finally glances up to see his classroom laced with string! Earlier in the period, one waggish student had slipped a ball of twine from Gordon's wastebasket and passed it behind him. All the students took the twine, wrapped it around some accommodating protuberance on their desk, and passed it on. By period's end the room resembles a web worthy of Shelob, the giant spider in *The Lord of the Rings*.

As the delighted students exit the room, each receives a souvenir of the day: a detention slip, courtesy of the unamused cooperating teacher.

One of the activities Gordon and his classmates planned with Hilda Wallace Hughes was a visit to the University School of Ohio State University in nearby Columbus, Ohio, and it was there that Gordon grew to appreciate even more the possibilities of the core curriculum. "The core program at the University School was one of the best in the nation," Gordon says today.

In 1946, Gordon would become more familiar with the school as he took advantage of Antioch College's fifth year by submitting an independent study proposal which took him on a journey-by-thumb, the results of which would be sort of a hitchhiker's guide to some of the thirty schools which had participated in the Eight-Year Study (1933-1941) sponsored by the Progressive Education Association. Gordon was disappointed to see that there was "very little left" of the innovative curricula and the fiery enthusiasm which had characterized the early years of the experiment. But Gordon's own fervor had been ignited by his reading and observation, and his enduring love affair with the core curriculum had begun.

#### Genesis of a core teacher

Following graduation from Antioch in 1948, Gordon worked as a counselor (responsible primarily for nature and handicrafts) at Gaysville Campers, a camp run by Wanda Greineisen and Letty Johnson, who also administered the Farm School north of Chicago. He had spent several previous summers in the same position and greatly enjoyed working with the young campers (age 7-12); he saw at Gaysville even more clearly the rich possibilities of outdoor education.

In the fall he enrolled in a master's program in science education at Ohio State University and there fell under the beneficent thrall of Harold Albery, author of a number of influential journal articles and of *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum*, a landmark volume. Albery's

course on how to be a core teacher, says Vars, was another foundation stone in the edifice of his career.

Summer, 1949. Gordon has completed his master's degree and is on his way to Bel Air Junior-Senior High School in Harford County, Maryland, just northwest of the Chesapeake Bay. Newly-wed to Annis, Gordon would begin his classroom career as a teacher of eighth grade core (English, social studies, science) and ninth grade general science.

"I made a big mistake," Gordon remembers. "The mistake many beginning teachers make. I let the kids get away from me. Many days when I went to school there was a real question as to who was in charge. Finally, over Christmas break, I thought it over, and when I returned, I instituted a dictatorship. Nobody moved in my room."

After that decision Gordon's classroom was not one that would have brought a smile of admiration to the lips of Albery back at Ohio State, but Gordon "managed to survive" that first year, and two more, gradually assuming the post of A-V Coordinator along with his heavy teaching load.

By the spring of 1952 Gordon's reputation and classroom expertise had attracted the attention of the directors of the Demonstration School at George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, and, following a classroom visitation by the school's director, Gordon was hired to teach eighth grade core (English, social studies, science, math).

At Peabody, Gordon's belief in the "tremendous potential" of outdoor education was re-affirmed. Camping was an important feature of the curriculum, and Gordon participated enthusiastically, eventually becoming director of the program.

William Van Til was Chairman of the Division of Curriculum and Teaching at Peabody when Gordon arrived. Van Til's son Jon would be in Gordon's first class, his daughter Barbara would follow in subsequent years. After three years at the Demonstration School, Gordon became Van Til's graduate assistant and thus began what Van Til later characterized as "an enduring close professional relationship." Gordon today refers to Van Til as "my mentor, my supporter, the one who pushes me."

With his dissertation begun ("Methods and Materials in the Core Curriculum: Some Suggestions for Teachers") Gordon and his family headed for New York, where he had found at the State University College at



# Gordon F. Vars: A Memoir

William Van Til  
*Coffman Distinguished Professor  
 Emeritus of Education  
 Indiana State University*

I first met Gordon Vars when he came to George Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1952. Gordon had been a core curriculum teacher in Maryland for the previous three years. His Peabody work assignment was to teach the eighth grade at Peabody Demonstration School, and Bee and I were the parents of Jon in his class. At that time, I was Chairman of the Division of Curriculum and Teaching, which included as an autonomous unit the Peabody Demonstration School.

From the beginning, I was well impressed with the young Vars. If asked to describe him, I would have used such terms as bright, earnest, competent, of high integrity, consistent, persistent, educationally progressive, and thoroughly professional. Son Jon regarded him as a fine teacher. So when rumors reached my desk that some parents were dissatisfied with his teaching, I phoned him to find out how I could help.

Gordon told me that he had scheduled a meeting of parents of eighth graders, at which time

criticisms by parents of his teaching about evolution and his contributions to sex education were to be voiced and discussed. I offered to bring together with him for pre-planning, myself, my wife Bee, Professor James L. Hymes, and his wife Lucia, also parents. Jimmy was a childhood education specialist and a veteran of many educational wars, including conflicts over sex education. Months later Gordon commented in a paper he wrote both for a Peabody graduate course in sociology and for his own record of events, "It was a friendly and sympathetic group which realized the difficult position I was in and helped me lay plans for the forthcoming parents' meeting so it would go in a positive rather than a negative direction."

By the close of this planning session, it was apparent to all of us that the dissatisfaction grew out of fundamentalist religious convictions, parental squeamishness about the mentioning of menstruation in a mixed class, and student

restiveness under Gordon's discipline procedures. Gordon, perceptive then as now, reported in his term paper:

Mr. E (Gordon's disguised symbol for me) saw the issue as one of academic freedom versus thought control and felt that a defeat at the eighth grade level might open the way for attacks at other levels, including the college. His statement, "This is one (battle) we *have* to win!" left no doubt in my mind of the importance of this issue to him professionally as well as in his parental capacity.

It was important to me. This was a time of McCarthyism. Educational McCarthyites had unleashed reactionary forces against education. I was in the midst of editing a 1953 ASCD Yearbook, *Forces Affecting American Education*, for which I was to be rewarded by threats of libel suits and the reading of hostile reviews into the Congressional Record.

Fortunately, in the eighth

Plattsburgh a job suited to his increasingly diverse professional interests: He would teach ninth grade core (English, social studies, science) at the Campus School as well as undergraduate education courses. It would be a combination of teaching assignments he would endeavor to maintain for the rest of his career.

With major funding from the Ford Foundation, Cornell University was initiating

its famed "Junior High School Project" in 1959, and Gordon was quick to realize the potential value of this pioneering effort.

Having completed his dissertation in 1958, Gordon joined the faculty of the Project as an associate professor—the "curriculum person" on the team, with additional responsibilities to teach courses in English methods, junior high school curriculum, and supervise student



grade mini-conflict we won. The Hymes and Van Til foursome spoke up early on behalf of teaching about controversial issues and a fair and open discussion of problems; we were supported by some other parents. The director of the school traced some student dissatisfaction to strong discipline policies enforced by Vars at the director's suggestion and encouragement. Gordon skillfully defended his teaching yet admitted to alleged faults. The protestors spoke up vigorously. But, in time, most were persuaded of Gordon's fairness and were somewhat mollified though not fully convinced. The year went on and Gordon built closer relationships with parents. At year's end, son Jon pronounced Gordon, with his school camping week and his problem-oriented curriculum, the best teacher he ever had.

From then on, I had an enduring close professional relationship with Gordon. During the years of my Peabody division chairmanship, I worked too with John Lounsbury who became my

graduate assistant and who wrote with my advisement an excellent doctoral dissertation on the development and goals of the junior high school in America. In the late 1950s I left Peabody for a New York University post. Vars, Lounsbury, and I decided to form a team to develop a textbook for educators on junior high school education. This partnership resulted in the writing of *Modern Education for the Junior High School Years*. It was the first of their many books. It sold well and went into two editions (1961, 1967) and established Vars and Lounsbury as outstanding leaders of their generation of writers about the middle years, a distinction both have maintained throughout their long careers.

The long and difficult negotiations with publishers testifies to the integrity and loyalty of both Vars and Lounsbury. At no time in these negotiations was there any intimation by them of willingness to compromise on the content of our textbook to appease commercial demands. In this long-ago event, both Vars and Lounsbury

showed themselves to be men who lived by their principles.

While an administrator at New York University, I attempted to persuade Gordon to join our Secondary Education Department staff. But living in the metropolitan New York City area held no charms for Gordon Vars and his family. Nor did he accept other posts for which I highly recommended him. He stayed with Kent State University.

Over the years, we have regularly met at conferences or when one of us was in the other's town for a speaking engagement. I have witnessed his lifelong dedication to the core curriculum idea and to the National Association for Core Curriculum. I am deeply grateful that when he and John Lounsbury wrote their book, *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years*, (Harper, 1978), it bore this inscription: "Dedicated to William Van Til, our mentor." The middle school movement and the core curriculum owe much to the energy and insight and persistence of Gordon F. Vars.

teachers.

The unique program at Cornell was a fifth year of study and preparation for liberal arts majors who were given intensive study of educational issues and practices and experience working with junior high school students. At year's end, the interns were certified 7-12 in their discipline; they were ready to begin careers in the junior high school.

Gordon looks back with justifiable pride on the accomplishments of the Junior High School Project. "We turned out some excellent teachers," he commented recently, "most notably Eliot Wigginton, compiler of the *Foxfire* volumes." But he was also pleased that his academic schedule at Cornell permitted him and the others (including Mauritz Johnson, Jr., William T. Lowe, and Oscar Mink) the time to reflect and write.

## Selected Middle Level Publications of Gordon F. Vars

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- Vars, G. F. (1962). Administrative leadership: Key to core program development. *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, 46(271), 91-103.
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- Vars, G. F. (1972). Curriculum in secondary schools and colleges. *A new look at progressive education (1972 Yearbook)*, pp 233-255). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.
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- Vars, G. F. (1988). Illustrative programs of middle level teacher education: Kent State University (Chap. 2). In W. Alexander & C. K. McEwin. *Preparing to teach at the middle level*. Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.
- Vars, G. F. (1991). Integrated curriculum in historical perspective. *Educational Leadership*. 49(2), 14-15.
- Vars, G. F. (1992). Humanizing student evaluation and reporting, In J. L. Irvin (Ed.). *Transforming middle level education: Perspectives and possibilities*(pp 336-365). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Van Til, W., Vars, G. F., & Lounsbury, J. H. (1961; 2nd ed. 1967). *Modern education for the junior high years*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Lounsbury, J. H., & Vars, G. F. (1978). *A curriculum for the middle school years*. New York: Harper & Row.



Gordon believes that one of the pamphlets he wrote for the Project (*Teaching in Teams*) remains one of his best works.

It was during Gordon's six years at Cornell that the first edition of *Modern Education for the Junior High School Years* appeared (Bobbs-Merrill, 1961). Van Til, principal editor of the first edition, recalls that the book "sold well" (a second edition came out in 1967) and "established Vars and Lounsbury (the co-authors) as outstanding leaders of their generation of writers about the middle years."

Unfortunately, Ford Foundation funding ran dry; the president of Cornell eliminated the School of Education; and Gordon moved on—not all that unwillingly. "I had not been in the classroom for six years," he says, "and my anecdotes were growing stale!" Recalling his happy days in Plattsburgh, Gordon sought a position which would permit him, once again, to combine his interest in working with youngsters as well as undergraduate and graduate students.

In 1966, he found the right combination at Kent State University where he taught eighth grade core (English, social studies, and guidance) at the University School in the morning, "Principles of Teaching" to undergraduates in the afternoon, and assorted curriculum courses and seminars to graduates in the evening.

To Gordon's great dismay, Kent State phased out its University School ("a disaster," he maintains)—pruning its structure like a diseased tree: first the high school, then the ninth grade, then seventh and eighth, finally the elementary—and Gordon lost the opportunity to work with youngsters in a classroom setting, a loss he feels dearly, for he had sought throughout his career to enliven his professional education courses with news from the front lines. Although he continues to teach Sunday school classes of young adolescents, he is quick to observe that "it isn't the same."

### Middle schools emerge

By the mid-1960s, a new wave of interest in intermediate education was washing over the country. The "middle school" began to replace the "junior high school" as the phrase of favor. Gordon believes that a speech delivered at Cornell by William Alexander in 1963 was the "opening round" fired in the war to revise and reform America's junior high schools. In that speech, Alexander urged intermediate schools to return the ninth grade to the high school, to include the sixth grade, and to make the curriculum fit the clientele.

Gordon and many of the other leaders in the junior high school movement saw the emergence of the middle school as a chance to "revitalize what we'd always been talking about." Gordon recognized that in many places the junior high had become in practice little more than a "little high school" with programs and curricula indistinguishable from the upper secondary school levels. Such practices were an anathema to Gordon, who knew through long study and experience with youngsters that they needed programs designed specifically for their unique needs.

Yet Gordon was disdainful of those ahistorical (or antihistorical) voices in the new movement who failed to realize that most if not all the principles and philosophies espoused by middle school advocates had in fact been created and cherished by the pioneers of the junior high school movement a half century earlier.

Throughout the sixties, seventies, eighties, and on into the nineties, Gordon Vars has become one of the most respected leaders in middle school education. With his former graduate student colleague, John Lounsbury, he has published one of the germinal documents of the movement, *A Curriculum for the Middle School Years* (Harper & Row, 1978). He was editor of *Common Learnings: Core and Interdisciplinary Team Approaches* (International Textbook Company, 1969). He has published scores of articles in professional journals, encyclopedias, and assorted reference books. He participated in the writing of what many middle school educators today consider a vital document: *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 1982). He regularly serves as a consultant to state departments of education, school systems, and individual middle schools on topics ranging from curriculum to guidance to discipline to questions of professional ethics. He appears on the programs of local, regional, and national meetings and has been honored as "Ohio Middle School Educator of the Year" (1980) by the Ohio Middle School Association and in 1986 received the "John H. Lounsbury Award for Excellence in Middle School Education" from the National Middle School Association. He continues to train middle school teachers in their own buildings through the Junior High/Middle School Staff Development Program he developed at Kent State University. He and his second wife, Alice McVetty Vars, have even renovated their garage, transforming it into "The School House," a teaching center where they offer workshops, in-service sessions, and "personalized assistance

according to your group or individual needs."

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Gordon Vars has demonstrated a fierce loyalty to colleagues and causes. William Van Til says Gordon has been a man who has "lived by [his] principles."

Nowhere is this virtue more apparent than in his devotion to the core curriculum movement. In 1953, Gordon attended a meeting in Morgantown, West Virginia, where many of core's most prominent adherents discussed the possibility of creating a national association of core educators. Just over a year later, the National Association for Core Curriculum was formed. It holds local and national conventions and publishes a quarterly newsletter (*The Core Teacher*) which Gordon has edited since 1961.

On a recent sticky Ohio summer afternoon, Gordon and I sat under a sheltering tree beside his house and talked for several hours about his career. When I asked him why he has maintained his intransigent allegiance to core, he replied quite simply: "It's a good concept." This short sentence speaks volumes about Gordon Vars. He continues to embrace those principles he developed in childhood, refined in college and graduate school, and grew to love in adulthood.

Gordon is not sanguine about the future of core—nor about public education in general these days. "I am forecasting a dark age in American education," he says. He views with alarm the current fatuous infatuation with "competency tests" and "minimalist approaches."

"I'm all for accountability," he is quick to point out, "but when accountability means 'testability,' then I fear that tests will drive the curriculum, just as they did in New York with the Regents' Exam. I am afraid we're moving toward a national, uniform curriculum. Blaming the schools for poor performances on standardized tests is pure poppycock. How can you condemn the schools for a cultural phenomenon? Parents who permit their children unlimited hours in front of the television are to blame. Kids don't read today because they don't see anyone reading at home."

Gordon does not view television as evil electrified, however. "We've got to make our literacy more visual and auditory," he maintains. "In its power to communicate, television surpasses every medium in history; it's time," he thinks, "to quit treating it as a thieving servant and instead to unleash its awesome educative potential."

"I have never been a charismatic leader," he

says. "I've been a worker. I would like," he says finally, "to be remembered for putting kids first—and for practicing what I preached."

It is late winter, 1972. Gordon and several of his doctoral students are observing a one-room schoolhouse in rural Holmes County, Ohio. The teacher, a young girl no more than eighteen years of age and a "graduate" of the eighth grade, moves nervously through her lessons. A dozen or so youngsters comprise the school, grades one through eight. There is one row per grade level. (There are no second graders and only three fifth graders: a set of triplets.) The scene is a nineteenth century daguerreotype come to life.

Seated in the rear of the room are several hirsute Amish elders. It is their school; they are present to welcome us as visitors—and, no doubt, to make certain nothing untoward occurs.

Ramrod straight he sits, eyes glistening with curiosity. He belongs here, in this setting, with these children. Like the one-room schoolhouse itself, Gordon Vars is an American archetype.

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