Do We Need Strong Liberal Arts Curricular Materials?

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Creating and Distributing Strong Materials

The humanities and the social sciences are essential to achieving our educational goals for children. To that end, we should create and distribute strong curricular materials for teachers. But doing so presents us with the following pressing questions that must be addressed:

- Why haven't we distributed strong curricula?
- How can we remedy the situation?

Why Haven't We Distributed Strong Curricula?

There are a number of explanations for the failure to create and widely distribute high-quality liberal arts curricula. Just some of these reasons include (1) the meaning of curriculum, (2) the nature of knowledge, (3) who decides what's included in such curricula, (4) curriculum adoption, (5) the economics of the textbook and education materials industry, (6) teacher knowledge, (7) the use of school instructional time, and (8) the implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability systems.

The Meaning of Curriculum. In 2001, when the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) examined state curricula in the core areas of English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, the union found them to be woefully inadequate and concluded:

> the absence of clear, manageable curriculum contributes to current problems with our standards based reform efforts, and may also help to explain the disparities revealed when American student achievement is compared with that of students from other countries. U.S. curricula focus more on quantity than quality and teachers are expected to cover a dizzying array of subjects every school year…. Given that each teacher acts independently in culling the wide array of topics, one cannot be confident from year to year about what precisely a student had been exposed to thus making it difficult to build on prior learning.[1]

This is not a problem of the humanities versus the sciences; this is a structural problem in American education.

The Nature of Knowledge. A curriculum is not neutral. It makes a statement about what is legitimate knowledge. It represents choices. And those choices are frequently made as a result of complex power relationships and struggles among diverse groups that are often identifiable by class, race, gender, and religion. Such choices frequently lead to controversy.[2] Despite the continuing curricular wars (in math and science, for example), school personnel tend to avoid controversy and, when possible, will opt for materials likely to engender little concern from parents, community spokespersons, and policy makers.

Who Decides What's Included? The recent flap in Kansas over teaching evolution is an excellent example of the controversial nature of curriculum and the issue of who decides what is to be learned—evolution falls in or out of the state curriculum with each newly elected state board of education.[3] The influence of the Gablers, an influential, rightwing couple who reviewed textbooks in Texas, is another case in point. Statewide adoption had an enormous influence on what content publishers were willing to put in or leave out of their history texts. Because of this influence, the Gablers held tremendous sway over what went into history texts nationwide.

The introduction of E.D. Hirsch's "core curriculum" also exemplifies this controversy over who decides what information is included. The central criticism leveled at Hirsch was his audacity to decide "what every child should know." His initial efforts were roundly criticized as being too white and Eurocentric—too representative, in the eyes of his opponents, of a canon that was out of date and irrelevant to the lives of many American children. It has taken well over a decade, and many changes in the original curriculum, to get Hirsch's core curriculum materials accepted in about 800 of more than 150,000 U.S. schools.

Another example can be found in the controversy over *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, in reaction to concern that U.S. education materials were likely to leave us at a disadvantage in the scientific race generated by Sputnik, the National Science Foundation (NSF) gave Educational Services Incorporated (now known as Educational Development Corporation) funds to develop curricular materials for K–12 schooling. Although the bulk of their effort was in the natural sciences and mathematics, they also developed a social science course, MACOS. The MACOS curriculum was hailed in 1969 by the American Educational Research Association and the American Educational Publishers Institutes as "one of the most important efforts of our time to relate research findings and theory in educa-

tional psychology to the development of new and better instructional materials" and as "enormously suggestive of what we could and should be doing to equip the instructional process adequately," but by 1975, the curriculum was the center of a congressional debate. One congressman condemned MACOS as a program that threatened "to mold children's social attitudes and beliefs along lines that set them apart and alienate them from the beliefs and moral values of their parents and local communities."[4] Indeed, the House of Representatives voted to have NSF pass all their grants through Congress before they could be awarded. As a result, NSF quickly cut off funding for further development of MACOS, and the acclaimed curriculum disappeared from public schools.[5] Subsequently, other federal agencies became "twice shy" about developing rigorous K–12 curricular materials.

Curriculum Adoption. But the issue of content itself is only one brick in the wall that keeps innovative curricula out of our schools. Another problem is curriculum adoption. A case in point is the limited use of the excellent NSF-funded materials in science and mathematics and the curriculum materials in the arts and humanities developed with funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts. One contributing factor to the lack of adoption is that districts not only have to purchase the curriculum materials, but in many instances, unlike with commercially available curricula, must also make considerable investments in preparing teachers to use those resources. Many districts are reluctant to expend the time and money that are required for this training. In addition, although commercial developers can take advantage of established supply chains, the federally funded curriculum developers rarely have funds for dissemination.

The Economics of the Textbook Industry. Much has been written about the textbook industry and why texts seem to have been stripped of rich materials, instead becoming pallid, politically correct tomes.[6] One reason for this sorry state of affairs is that the academy has generally turned a blind eye to K–12 education. Scholars don't take K–12 materials seriously. They do not review the texts in their journals for intellectual quality or even for factual accuracy.[7] Dan Lacy, a former vice president at McGraw-Hill has another interesting take on this issue. Among the explanations he puts forth for why "the juice, the vitality, the idiosyncrasy … seems to have been blanched out of late 20th century textbooks" are competition in the industry and a desire to produce "what is wanted." About competition, he writes, "one of the myths of American life today is that a large number of producers will assure the diversity and high quality of what is produced." He continues:

> Textbook adoptions are not so much a selection of books for their virtues as a process of elimination of books for their vices. What is left is likely to be the book that has offended no one rather than the book that has extraordinary virtues that are perhaps novel, idiosyncratic, or different. [8]
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> Producing textbooks is an expensive proposition—indeed, a series can run into the millions of dollars, and publishers are not going to gamble on their bottom lines by including controversial subjects. They will give the textbook committees what the committees desire.

Teacher Knowledge. The abovementioned problems plaguing K–12 schools are also a problem for postsecondary education, which in turn affects the quality of the U.S. teaching force.[9] K–12 teaching candidates who graduate with a watered-down training in the liberal arts will struggle in their efforts to teach the liberal arts to young students. You can't teach what you don't know.

Although all students must take a core of required liberal arts and sciences courses when they enter college, the breadth and quality of this course work is crucially important to prospective teachers, particularly for the many elementary and middle-school teachers who receive a great deal of their content preparation in those required courses. Yet in too many cases, colleges lack a fully coherent or rigorous general liberal arts and sciences curriculum in the first two years for prospective teacher candidates. Typically, students sample widely among the varied disciplines based on any variety of personal considerations. This may or may not be appropriate for most college students, but it is certainly a problem for teacher candidates. These teachers-in-training need a set of courses that provides them with broad exposure to and a sound foundation in the habits, subjects, and information that are relevant to what K–12 students are expected to know and be able to do.

Instructional Time, Accountability, and NCLB. It is not unusual for folks to argue that one reason that we cannot inject more liberal arts into the curriculum is that instructional time is limited, and the demands of NCLB accountability require that schools focus on what is tested. There is evidence that the curriculum in many schools, particularly in poor and minority neighborhoods, is being narrowed by the relentless concern for meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress demands of the No Child Left Behind legislation with its focus on reading and mathematics, and soon science, and that other subjects, such as art, music, and foreign languages are being crowded out of the school day.[10] But the greater emphasis on the NCLB tested subjects is by no means dramatic or universal.[11]

Instructional time is a fungible commodity. It may well be the case that we are not spending the time wisely rather than that there is a need for more time if we are to improve humanities instruction in the public schools. The fact that schools may be spending more time on reading instruction does not mean that the time spent on reading instruction could not also be used for rich experiences with literature. There is now a hue and cry for extending the school day and school year to provide more instructional time for children. While it is foolish in the 21st century to be operating schools on a 19th century agrarian calendar and additional time might be spent productively, layering on more time and courses, without first examining how we currently spend time, is likely to lead to more of the same. American children spend more time in school than students in other developed countries.[12] Just adding time is like speaking louder and slower to a non-English speaker in the hopes that somehow that will improve understanding.

How Can We Remedy the Situation?

The cultural, political, and structural obstacles to inculcating a high-quality liberal arts program in American public schools are formidable, but they are not insurmountable. A case in point is the serious colloquy between Deborah Meier and Diane Ravitch on this very subject.[13] Ravitch favors a national curriculum and Meier is less concerned with content than with developing "habits of mind" for success in a democratic society. These two perspectives are not incompatible. Whatever the common body of knowledge in the disciplines that is shared by educated people (Ravitch's perspective), it must be presented to children in a manner that causes them to ask the following questions: (1) How do we know what's true or not true? How credible is our evidence? (2) Is there an alternate perspective? How might this information look from another viewpoint? (3) Is there a connection between x and y? Is there a pattern? Have we seen this before? (4) What if… supposing that…? Could it have been otherwise if x not y had intervened? (5) Who cares? Does it matter? And to whom does it matter? (Meier's perspective).[14]

Regardless of where the curriculum decision is made—at the national, state, or local level—there is bound to be considerable agreement in the core content except at the political and ideological extremes. To overcome the concerns about "who decides"—and to heed the lessons we have learned from the controversy surrounding teaching evolution, MACOS, and the introduction of Hirsch's core curriculum—we need many serious efforts in which teachers take the lead in developing

grade-by-grade curricula sequences in literature, history, science, the arts, and mathematics that reflect the teachers' combined view of what it means to be educated in these fields. Additionally, those curricula must be subject to review by both academics and the local community that wishes to adopt them.

Following are some additional suggestions for overcoming obstacles to creating and implementing strong K–12 curricular materials in our nation's schools.

Get Serious about Teacher Preparation. First, if we are to improve the education and achievement of youngsters, we must improve the education of their teachers. The demands of teaching at every K–12 level require fundamentally well-educated people. It is difficult to overestimate the value of a strong foundation in the liberal arts. Teachers must understand what they want their students to experience and achieve. Their own academic and intellectual backgrounds must include critical and analytic work across the range of core subjects that constitute the liberal arts.

Teacher preparation must expose prospective teachers to excellent curricular materials in the various liberal arts. This preparation must also explain what makes these materials so valuable and how best to use them to help students develop the "habits of mind" identified by Meier. Teachers must understand the relationship between what they are doing in a particular grade and subject and what the long-term education goals are for children. They must understand the content and knowledge children have developed relative to the materials the students are using and recognize that what they are teaching will build the foundation for future learning. This requires a fundamental rethinking of teacher preparation and the role teachers play in ensuring that curricula meet the education needs for all children in a democracy.

Develop Rich, Coherent Humanities Programs. Teachers must be involved not only in delivering the curriculum but also in creating it. These curricular materials must enrich and expand the time currently dedicated to the language arts and social studies. The curriculum must do what standards cannot do. Although in no way endeavoring to be "teacher-proof," the materials must provide teachers with a detailed road map to help students reach the standards and prepare them for what lies ahead. In a standards-based system, a curriculum is the "how-to" guide for teachers. This curriculum helps them convey the "what" of the content standards, and teachers, along with academics and other content specialists, must be intimately involved in its creation.

A curriculum should achieve the following: (1) delineate the learning continuum within and across grade levels; (2) offer suggestions about how to integrate the standards within and across instructional units; (3) describe instructional delivery

strategies for the wide variety of ways in which students learn and the diverse knowledge and skill levels that exist within a classroom; (4) provide instructional materials with a range of complexity; and (5) include examples of fully developed lesson plans. A good curriculum will exhibit *all* of these qualities if it is to serve as the vehicle for accelerating and sustaining high student achievement over time.[15]

The curriculum should use multimedia technology, be delivered online, and include teacher-training materials. The materials should include online chatrooms for teachers to share how they used the materials, what worked with students, and the like, so that teachers can engage in "lesson study" around the materials as they improve and refine them.

We do not need a "national curriculum." What we need are many examples of rich, comprehensive, and coherent content that teachers can readily adapt so that students can reach high standards, regardless of whether those standards are set at the state or national level. Indeed, we must find ways to exploit some of the excellent curriculum materials produced by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the NSF, and others. And most important, we must provide the resources and opportunities for teachers to work together to develop curriculum materials.

Enhance the Federal Role. The federal government and nonprofit organizations should support efforts to unite the curricular materials developed by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other publishers. The express purpose should be to work with teachers and other educators to examine the quality of these curricular materials and to provide funds to have them disseminated. Along with the dissemination effort, funds must be made available for the professional development of teachers so that they can use the materials effectively. As the experience with MACOS and Core Knowledge demonstrates, it will be important to work at the local level to educate the public about the content of the curriculum and why it is important for children to be exposed to such material.

The federal government, states, and philanthropies should provide funds for extracurricular activities devoted to the liberal arts. The ballroom dancing competition for middle-school children, so dramatically presented in the recent documentary *Mad Hot Ballroom*, is an example of one such program.[16] The children not only gained many skills from that activity, but also experienced the sheer pleasure that comes from music and dance and being able to do something beautiful so well.

Define the State Role. Although some people have suggested that the best way to ensure that attention is given to the humanities in the curriculum is to implement high-stakes assessments,[17] others have suggested that testing has perverted the

process of learning that the humanities represent.[18] What is needed is state-level attention. States should require districts to demonstrate that they have well-developed curricula that will help youngsters meet the specified goals. States should create or monitor the curricular materials that local education agencies use in their efforts to infuse the humanities into the curriculum. And states should provide incentives and consequences for failing to provide such materials to children.

In Sum

To infuse the arts and humanities into the schooling of America's youth will require a strategic plan that addresses better preparation for teachers, particularly in regard to their liberal arts education; enriched curricular offerings for students; and the ability to "sell" the value of the liberal arts. Unfortunately, today's rhetoric has substituted "test scores" for learning and education. Until we convince state and federal governments that children must be encouraged to think independently, and not just give right answers, we will continue to struggle to introduce challenging materials into the school curriculum.

Endnotes

1 An AFT report, *Making Standards Matter 2001* (Washington, D.C. AFT, 2001), found that the absence of good curricular materials is not restricted to the humanities. Rigorous, coherent state curricula were lacking in science and math as well as in social studies and English language arts.

2 See James Gutherie's review of *Science Textbook Controversies and the Politics of Equal Time* by Dorothy Nelkin in *Science News Series* 195, no. 4291 (May 1977): 752–54.

3 E.C. Scott, "Not Just in Kansas Anymore," *Science* (2000): 813–15.

4 "House Orders Monthly Review for NSF," *Science News* 107, no. 16 (April 19, 1975): ISSN:00368423.

5 In a history of the MACOS debacle, Peter Dow pointed out the lack of teachers and other school personnel on the development team—people who could have warned the developers away from using sexual practices as an example of cultural differences. See also, Herbert Kleibard's review of Peter Dow's "Schoolhouse Politics: Lessons from the Sputnik Era," in *Science News* vol. 256, no. 5059 (May 1992): 1041–42. Hirsch talks at length about the need to have parents and the community familiar with the material to allay fears and gain acceptance.

6 D. Ravitch, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

7 J. Featherstone, "Revising America: A Symposium at the National Endowment for the Humanities," *The History Teacher* 13, no. 4 (1980): 566–70.

8 D. Lacy, "Revising America: A Symposium at the National Endowment for the Humanities," *The History Teacher* vol. 13, no. 4 (1980): 570–74.

[9] See "College Learning for the New Global Century. A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)" (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007).

[10] "NCLB: Narrowing the Curriculum?", Policy Brief 3, Center on Education Policy: Washington, D.C., July 2005.

[11] Martin West, "Testing, Learning, and Teaching: The Effects of Test-Based Accountability on Student Achievement and Instructional Time in Core Academic Subjects." Paper presented at Thomas B. Fordham Institute conference "Beyond the Basics: Why Reading, Math and Science Aren't Sufficient for a 21st Century Education," Washington, DC, December 12, 2006.

[12] Aaron Benavot, Instructional Time and Curriculum Emphasis: U.S. State Policies in Comparatve Perspective." Paper presented at Thomas B. Fordham Institute conference "Beyond the Basics: Why Reading, Math and Science Aren't Sufficient for a 21st Century Education," Washington, DC, December 12, 2006.

[13] See their *Education Week* blog, "Bridging the Differences," available at http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/Bridging-Differences/2007/.

[14] Habits of mind as described in Meier posting, *Bridging the Differences*, April 23, 2007.

[15] AFT, op.cit.

[16] Several inner-city schools participate in a ballroom dancing contest for fifth- and sixth-grade middle-school students. The program not only teaches them dancing—rumba, meringue, tango, and the like—but also teaches them about how to get along with others, behave in new settings, stick with a problem until it is mastered, and learn about their own skills and preferences.

[17] Martin West, *op cit.*

[18] Stanley N. Katz, "The Liberal Arts in School and College." *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 27 (March 10, 2006), B47-B48.