

## **Toward a Coherent Curriculum (1995 ASCD Yearbook)**

**Edited by James A. Beane**

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### **Foreword**

Early in my career, a consultant introduced me to the term ambiguity tolerance as a desirable trait for school administrators to possess. Since then I've found that most educators live in a curricular world where ambiguity tolerance is a valuable commodity. The curriculum in numerous schools lacks clarity and, more important, coherence.

Students move from teacher to teacher and subject to subject along a curriculum continuum that may or may not exhibit planned articulation. The most carefully designed curriculums are often fragmented into various subjects or disciplines. Teachers supply some coherence in terms of how they transform an intended curriculum into an Experienced curriculum. Students provide the last measure of coherence, based on mastery of previous material and their ability to relate learnings to other life occurrences.

Real coherence in a curriculum is an elusive theme to capture and may not be possible, at least in the philosophical sense. The pursuit, however, must not slow its pace. The authors of this book point the way for others in describing their own searches for meaning. They elaborate on the problems, while proposing various ways to hold the Curriculum together in a unified system. This curriculum "glue" comes in several different bottles for selection by the reader.

This ASCD yearbook deliberately avoids trying to eliminate all the ambiguity that exists with respect to curriculum. The authors, experts in the field, agreed that it would be premature and presumptuous of them to agree among themselves on The Coherent Curriculum. Instead, they have certainly advanced the discussion to new heights and helped educators everywhere move toward a more coherent curriculum. Curriculum development is seen as a dynamic process wherein ambiguity is lessened and coherence increased.

My affiliation with ASCD has been intellectually enriched with stimulating ideas regularly produced and reproduced through its various books, journals, and conferences. Many of the educational concepts or techniques presented are appealing. A few are outside my experience. Most cause me to expand my thinking. The 1995 ASCD Yearbook, *Toward a Coherent Curriculum*, is no exception to the enrichment ASCD offers educators.

—Arthur W. Steller, ASCD President, 1994–95

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## Prologue

The theme for this yearbook emerged from a sense that the curriculum in too many schools consists of a disconnected, fragmented—incoherent—collection of information and skills programs, courses, and so on. This incoherence contributes to the conviction of many young people that their school experiences have no meaning or significance in their lives. Almost anyone who works in or with schools knows the urgency of this problem.

The preparation of the yearbook followed in the tradition of many that ASCD has issued in the past. The work began by convening Yearbook Committee of ASCD members who represented a variety of backgrounds and perspectives in terms of culture, gender, geography, and professional positions. What they had in common was evidence of previous work that addressed the need for coherence in the curriculum. The committee met for three days in June 1993 and, after much discussion and debate, worked out an organization for the book, including ideas for specific content.

Early in the Committee's deliberations, we realized that our work would not and should not result in a description of the or a coherent curriculum. In the first place, it appeared unlikely that we could ever reach consensus on a single "model." Even if we could do that, we fully understood that what was coherent for us might not be coherent for others, especially the diverse young people in communities across the country and around the globe. Finally, we understood that commitment to a coherent curriculum depends in part on having a hand in its creation and understanding completely the contributing ideas.

The book that the Committee eventually envisioned, which you now hold in your hands, addresses the possibilities for coherence in three parts. The first part, entitled "What Is a Coherent Curriculum?" raises a number of questions related to the search for coherence in the curriculum as well as some possible features of a coherent curriculum. The second part describes attempts to create coherence in the curriculum. It includes both theoretical perspectives and school stories about such matters as organizing themes, curriculum organization, and assessment. The third part presents commentaries on the previous section. This kind of critique reflects both the seriousness with which the Yearbook Committee took its work and the understanding that real progress toward curriculum improvement must always involve give-and-take about ideas.

Thus, we sought to present in this yearbook a collection of ideas, perspectives, possibilities, and questions that people might use in moving toward coherence in the curriculum. In the end, it is our hope that this yearbook will be used in exactly that way: as a starting point for deliberation and conversation by everyone who has a stake in the curriculum of our schools—educators, parents and other adults in the community, and, of course, the young people whose lives in school are largely defined by the curriculum. If this book makes that kind of contribution, then we will consider our work well worth the effort.

—James A. Beane for the 1995 Yearbook Committee

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## 1. Introduction: What Is a Coherent Curriculum?

by James A. Beane

Imagine that we are faced with a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces and told to put them together. Our first reaction might well be to ask for the picture. When we put together a jigsaw puzzle, we usually have a picture to guide us. None of the pieces means anything taken alone; only when the pieces are put together do they mean something.

In the beginning, we hold each piece up to the picture to see roughly what space to place it in. Later on, after we have put some pieces together, we look for other pieces to attach to a partly completed section. Even as we put these large chunks together, we still look back at the picture to make sure we're on the right track. It is always the picture that guides us. Putting pieces together without the picture can only be a frustrating struggle—at best, a way to kill some time.

This jigsaw puzzle metaphor ought to say something to educators. It is, after all, not unlike how young people experience the curriculum in too many schools. They move from one classroom to another, from one time block to another, from one textbook to another, from one teacher to another, confronted by disconnected, fragmented pieces of information or skills. For these young people, the curriculum is a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces without a picture. They might ask, "What does all of this mean?" or "What is all of this about?" More often, they simply ask, "Why do we have to do this?" We respond, "Because it will be on the test," or "You'll need it next year," or "You'll find out later in life," or, in exasperation, "Because I said so."

Where is the sense in these responses? Could it be that we ourselves cannot summon a reasonable explanation for what we ask young people to do in the curriculum? Is it possible that we ourselves are unclear or do not know, apart from institutional timelines, what it is that the curriculum is all about? Can it be that the jigsaw puzzle metaphor describes not only the experiences of young people in our schools, but also our own confusion about the curriculum?

This yearbook is about the jigsaw puzzle metaphor. The title, *Toward a Coherent Curriculum*, invites the professional community and others to imagine ways in which we might overcome the problems that metaphor reveals. But this is no leisurely, armchair exercise. The call for coherence insists that we undertake fundamental rethinking of the curriculum. It asks that we abandon our specialized loyalties to particular parts and reconsider what and whom the curriculum is for. This is quite different from most current efforts toward restructuring that seek simply to align or systematize those parts, to demand uniformity, or to tinker with one or more organizational features of the schools. Nor does it simply seek a peaceful coexistence of

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what is now fragmented and sometimes contentious. Instead, this search for coherence goes to the very center of school life, to the curriculum that defines and mediates the experiences of young people.

The problem of incoherence in the curriculum has a sense of urgency about it. The stakes are high. Increasingly, our students are questioning the purpose and meaning of what we ask them to do. Their lives in school have been deadened by the litany of disconnected facts and skills they face every day. So too are teachers' lives deadened, not only by the students' constant requests for justification, but by their own questions: "Why am I teaching this?" and "If this makes no sense to me, how can I keep asking students to learn it?"

Surely there is no lack of effort being put into the curriculum these days. Talk has heated up about a national curriculum and tests, and countless committees and subcommittees are at work deciding what young people ought to learn in one subject or another. Professional associations of all descriptions are issuing statements trying to put their own stamp on curriculum reform. At least two "umbrella" groups, the Alliance for Curriculum Reform and the Forum on Standards and Learning, are seeking to open dialogue among the fragmented community of professional associations. And hardly a journal issue passes without some suggestion for a "new" curriculum.

Meanwhile, in schools and districts, from classrooms to grade levels to departments to central offices, local curriculum committees are hard at work on a dazzling array of projects that can hardly be said in one breath: outcome-based education, curriculum alignment, interdisciplinary instruction, integrated curriculum, authentic assessment, whole language, multicultural education, thematic teaching, and on and on. There are always some people who love a task of any kind, who thrive on ambiguity, who are willing to simply move from one idea to another. For them, such a flurry of curriculum activity is a pretty picture.

For many local educators, however, it is not. They wonder—and not without reason—what will be next year's topic, or maybe next week's. If they are going to spend time and energy on a project, they want to know that it will make some large and lasting difference, that it is not just a passing fad or some isolated activity that has no connection to a whole. These educators often feel that so many trends are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without a picture to guide them. Perhaps this metaphor can help us understand in our own terms how young people experience an incoherent curriculum.

## The Meaning of Coherence in the Curriculum

A "coherent" curriculum is one that holds together, that makes sense as a whole; and its parts, whatever they are, are unified and connected by that sense of the whole. The idea of coherence begins with a view of the curriculum as a broadly conceived concept—as THE curriculum—that is about "something." It is not simply a collection of disparate parts or pieces that accumulate in student experiences and on transcripts. A coherent curriculum has a sense of the forest as well as the trees, a sense of unity and connectedness, of relevance and pertinence. Parts or pieces are connected or integrated in ways that are visible and explicit. There is a sense of a larger, compelling purpose, and actions are tied to that purpose.

The idea of a coherent curriculum is not just another passing fad or this year's "hot topic." It is, in fact, one of the fundamental characteristics of a worthwhile curriculum. Think, for example, about the converse of the preceding definition. An "incoherent" curriculum is one whose parts do not hold together in any way; instead, they are disconnected and fragmented. It lacks a sense of unity, relevance, pertinence, or larger purpose. Actions are simply something people do, not necessarily for any clear or compelling purpose.

Such a stark and negative picture is not meant to imply that the curriculum in our schools is thoroughly incoherent. Rather, it is meant to point out what we want to avoid. At the same time, the negative picture suggests the importance of coherence in the curriculum and the urgency of the work before us. Moving toward a coherent curriculum offers possibilities of unity and connectedness among everyday activities in the school and educational experiences for young people that will make sense in terms of larger purposes.

This kind of coherence will open up possibilities for the integration of educational experiences (Hopkins and others 1937, Dressel 1958). That is, when the curriculum offers a sense of purpose, unity, relevance, and pertinence—when it is coherent—young people are more likely to integrate educational experiences into their schemes of meaning, which in turn broadens and deepens their understanding of themselves and the world. In that sense, we might say that a coherent curriculum is one that offers "unforgettable" experiences to young people. Lacking such coherence, the curriculum is likely to be little more than a smorgasbord of superficial, abstract, irrelevant, and quickly forgotten pieces.

Thus, the search for coherence does not mean simply clarifying purposes in the existing curriculum. Rather, it suggests that creating coherence involves connecting parts or pieces of the curriculum, identifying meaningful contexts for information and skills, and helping young people and adults to make sense of learning experiences.

Such conditions, however, are never apart from the politics of curriculum. Moving toward coherence means confronting a variety of views about themes and purposes that might hold the curriculum together, as well as seeking widespread understanding of what the curriculum is about.

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We will return to these issues later in considering what is involved in moving toward coherence in the curriculum. For the moment, however, we should realize that thinking about coherence in the curriculum raises several questions:

- In what ways is the present curriculum incoherent?
- How did it become incoherent?
- How might the curriculum be made more coherent?
- What might a coherent curriculum look like?
- Who should be involved in making a coherent curriculum?

### **Conditions of Incoherence**

Evidence abounds to show that our present curriculum is incoherent. For example, most schools offer a collection of subjects or courses of study that are separate and distinct entities. Their boundaries are virtually etched in stone by schedules, teacher loyalties, and organizational structures like departments, subject area committees, and subject-specific supervisors and chairpersons. The latter, as well as some teachers, define their roles in terms of specialized areas: "I am a language arts (or math, or music, or science, or art, or something else) teacher" or "I like to teach reading more than science."

According to the folklore of education, the problem of incoherence occurs only in middle and high schools. Indeed, these institutions are historical bastions of the separate subject approach, tracked programs, and other instances of fragmentation. Yet elementary schools offer their own version of such problems. After all, the self-contained classrooms in many elementary schools only thinly disguise a day divided into subject or skill time slots, instruction in a long variety of subskills, and specialized instruction in "nonacademic" subjects. And the move toward departmentalization is becoming increasingly popular in the upper elementary grades.

Across all levels of schooling, moreover, any specific or particular concern seems to require a separate program: technical for the supposedly linear and sequential, humanities for the arts, "advisory" for the emotional, academic for college preparation, vocational for work preparation, "exploratory" or "special" for the "nonacademic," and a myriad of thinking, reading, writing, self-esteem, and problem "prevention" programs. When new concerns arise, we simply add new programs with their own scheduling slots, space, specialized teachers, and, often, newly labeled students.

In compartmentalizing the curriculum in these ways, we act on our own visions of the presumed fragmentation of knowledge, skill, and human activity.

Young people, too, are disassembled into a collection of disconnected parts. The brain is viewed as having differentiated parts for distinctive functions—one for reasoning, another for feeling, and so on—with relatively little communication among them, but each conveniently matched to a different type of school program. Affective,

cognitive, and psychomotor dimensions are acted on in the school as if their differentiation in theoretical discussions were true in real life (Beane 1990).

Furthermore, our views of young people as learners are plagued by a sense that somehow the multidimensional roles in their lives can be differentiated. The well-known Supreme Court reminder that young people do not "leave their rights at the schoolhouse doors" hints at this kind of fragmentation. For example, educators have sought to sharpen their understanding of human growth by assigning "stages of development" to various age groups. While this has supported helpful work in the area of "developmentally appropriate practice," it has also obscured the fact that all young people, regardless of age, live in the larger world. Thus, they experience all of what that means in terms of affluence and poverty, cultural diversity and prejudice, justice and injustice, safety and danger, and so on. In short, their lives are more than just the characteristics associated with some stage of development. The tendency to freeze them in one stage or another not only denies their real lives, but describes only a fragment of young people as whole persons.

Expecting young people to suspend experiences in the larger world contributes to the incoherence that arises from the implication that what happens inside the school has little to do with what happens inside a young person. It is as if there were no out-of-school curriculum from which young people learn about themselves and their world. Worse yet, this perspective implies that the larger world has nothing to offer by way of the "pictures" that show how the pieces of the curriculum hold together.

But what about young people themselves? How does this look to them? Surely they must imagine that there is a reasonable explanation for the disconnection of school from life and the fragmented division of subjects, programs, skills, and activities into separate courses, periods, modules, time slots, tests, projects, worksheets, and so on. Yet they (and we) are nonplussed by the inadequate explanations we offer. Clearly, young people not only sense the incoherence of the curriculum, but know in some way that the incoherence does not make sense.

Isn't it about time that we recognized (or admitted) that the boundaries and categories that fragment the inner life of the school are socially constructed and largely artificial? They do not spring onto the scene from some mystical force. Academic scholars, for example, define the lines that "separate" disciplines of knowledge to secure space in their world and to ease communication among those with similar interests. As Michael Apple (1979, p. 38) has pointed out, "One major reason that subject-centered curricula dominate most schools, that integrated curricula are found in relatively few schools, is at least partly the result of the place of the school in maximizing the production of high status knowledge." Moreover, those who specialize in one or another particular area produce and promote special skill programs. Prevention programs result from interest groups concerned with their own interpretation of one or another particular personal or social problem. And across all of these, the arguments for space and priority in the curriculum have historically been much more about politics than about the quality of educational experiences for young people (Kliebard 1986, Popkewitz 1987, Goodson 1993).

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## **Moving Toward a Coherent Curriculum**

The idea of coherence in the curriculum is both compelling and complex and involves a number of issues: design, content, connections, and meaning. The purpose here is to lay out the grounds for these issues. Subsequent chapters in this book discuss how such issues might be resolved through specific curriculum arrangements.

Coherence in the curriculum involves creating and maintaining visible connections between purposes and everyday learning experiences. When adults plan the curriculum, they have to decide not only what its purposes will be, but what kinds of learning experiences will lead toward those purposes. That those plans seem coherent to adults does not necessarily mean that young people will sense the same coherence. For this reason, young people are faced with the challenge of understanding the larger purposes of the curriculum, connecting particular learning experiences to those purposes and, all along the way, learning about the pieces themselves.

For example, we may say that we want our students to have a sense of the world in which they live, so we introduce statistics to help them understand certain patterns in that world. At every moment in our work on statistics, we risk disconnecting that work from the real world or, in other words, making it simply an abstract exercise in mathematics. The continuing challenge here is to persistently maintain the connection between the larger purpose and the specific activity. Young people also face the simultaneous challenge of learning about statistics, using that learning to broaden their understanding of the world, and continuously maintaining a sense of the connection between the activity and its purpose. Responding to those three challenges is clearly a crucial aspect of curriculum planning and teaching because it offers the possibility that young people will have a sense of what the curriculum is about as a whole.

Moving toward a coherent curriculum involves creating contexts that organize and connect learning experiences. When we are confronted with a problem or puzzling situation in real life, we hardly stop to think, "Which part is mathematics, which physical education, which science, which thinking, which valuing, and so on?" Rather, we sense the problem or situation and then bring to bear whatever we need to know or do without regard for the source. And, of course, if the problem or situation is compelling enough, we are moved to get needed knowledge or skills that we do not already have. Understood this way, knowledge and skills are organically integrated in real life, while their separation in school programs is an artificial and distracting arrangement.

Curriculum talk, therefore, frequently includes references to the curriculum being organized around themes. The use of themes helps both adults and young people to see a context for their learning activities and to sense that those activities have some larger purpose.

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The repositioning of learning experiences into meaningful contexts is the point of much of the current work on curriculum organization. That work, of course, has taken many different forms. For instance, intradisciplinary efforts bring together smaller pieces of content or skill that are actually parts of a larger discipline of knowledge but that have been disconnected by overspecialization in the curriculum. Here we might place the struggle to create "social studies" out of history, geography, civics, and other aspects of social living (Saxe 1992). Other intradisciplinary examples are the more recent whole language movement and projects in science and mathematics aimed at reconstituting the larger disciplines. A second example is multidisciplinary or multisubject arrangements that involve correlations among two or more areas (Jacobs 1989). In this increasingly popular arrangement, teachers select a theme like "Colonial Living" or "Metrics" from the existing curriculum and then ask what various subject areas might contribute to the theme. Or they might arrange the subjects around some appealing or popular topic like "Kites" or "Whales."

A third example is curriculum integration. Here themes are based on real-life personal issues faced by young people or major social problems like "Conflict" or "Environmental Problems." Knowledge and skills are integrated in the context of the theme and drawn from any pertinent source without regard for subject area lines. This approach blurs or dissolves the boundaries between subject areas or disciplines of knowledge.

A fourth form—actually a variation on the third—involves planning an integrated curriculum with a particular group of young people who themselves identify the issues and problem areas that cluster into themes (Beane 1991, 1993; Brodhagen, Weilbacher, and Beane 1992). This approach extends the jigsaw puzzle metaphor by asking, "Whose picture is it?" When we purchase a jigsaw puzzle, we don't just buy any puzzle. We go through the box covers looking for a picture that has meaning to the person who will put the puzzle together, either ourselves or others we know. After all, the work is made more or less enjoyable and compelling by the interest we have in the picture.

Although the term curriculum integration is currently used to describe all of these forms of nonseparate subject arrangements, its use with the first two is a relatively recent development. Historically, the term "integration" has most often been reserved for problem-centered themes that help students integrate educational experiences into their ongoing personal and social lives (Hopkins et al. 1937; Dressel 1958; Beane 1993). In short, "integration" was something that young people did for themselves, rather than a simple correlation of various subjects arranged by adults. For our purposes here, though, it is almost redundant to say that a coherent curriculum involves efforts to move beyond a separate subject-matter or skill-area approach and eventually toward more frequent use of integrated arrangements.

Thinking about a curriculum organized around themes, especially those associated with "integration," immediately raises questions about what happens to the content currently covered in schools and its presently conceived sequences. Advocates of thematic designs have taken great pains to demonstrate that they are not abandoning valued content but

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rather asking how it might be repositioned in the context of themes. But it is also possible that some content presently "covered," as well as subject-centered sequences, could be at risk. This is exactly the point partially made by the idea of coherence in the curriculum. That is, we are currently faced with a good deal of school-based content that is so disconnected from meaningful contexts that it defies clear meaning for anyone. In some cases, there appears to be no purpose beyond games of academic "trivial pursuit." The question before us is whether the concept of coherence is so crucial to worthwhile learning that we are willing to seriously reconsider the place of such content in the school.

It is important to note, however, that the development of a thematic curriculum is not simply a methodological challenge of connecting pieces of the curriculum. Such connections will promote coherence only if they enhance the sense of purpose and meaning for young people. Moreover, the matter of whether themes themselves are drawn from topics already found in the subject-centered curriculum, from real-life problems, or from some other source may well influence the degree to which young people find meaning in their learning experiences. And, as we shall see, it also has a great deal to do with the politics of curriculum.

Considering the importance of integration in relation to coherence, moving toward a coherent curriculum must involve more fully exploring how people make sense out of experiences. Students of all ages construct schemes of meaning about themselves and their world (Caine and Caine 1991). Such schemes are constructed out of experiences and are shaded by the influences of culture. So it is that any particular experience might have a variety of meanings among young people, depending on race, ethnicity, class, gender, geography, age, family patterns, and many other cultural aspects. Such aspects of cultural diversity may also serve as a kind of "glue" for piecing together experiences to create the "pictures" that are schemes of meaning. In short, the continuous interplay between experience and meaning is a crucial dimension of a sense of coherence. Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, and Berliner put it this way: "The more meaningful, the more deeply or elaboratively processed, the more situated in context, and the more rooted in cultural, background, metacognitive, and personal knowledge an event is, the more readily it is understood, learned, and remembered" (1990, p. 511).

Understanding this leads us toward two final considerations in creating a coherent curriculum. One is that if the curriculum is to be coherent for young people, it must connect with their present experiences. This means that the themes or ideas that hold the curriculum together must make space for young people to find points of personal engagement. That is, the curriculum must have room for their own questions, concerns, aspirations, and interests. We may construct glamorous and clever curriculum designs with the most fascinating activities we can imagine; but in the end, if we don't allow room for personal connections, our curriculum will remain remote, superfluous, and incoherent.

Second, a coherent curriculum must account for who young people are. The diverse dimensions of culture are not simply abstract categories in schools. In very concrete

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ways, young people bring the entire range to school. It is unlikely that adults who also present a range of cultural diversity can construct a curriculum that will have the same meaning for all young people. A coherent curriculum recognizes and honors diversity and ambiguity. By definition, then, our search for coherence is not a search for a single, magical curriculum neatly bound in a three-ring binder or attractive textbook. Instead, it is a "messy" exploration of the ways in which diverse people connect, organize, and make sense out of their experiences.

## **The Politics of Coherence**

The discussion to this point has focused on issues such as organization and design that we might say are "internal" to the process of curriculum planning. These are, of course, crucial to the possibility of moving toward a coherent curriculum. However, as noted earlier, these issues are never apart from the politics of curriculum. After all, curriculum planning is something that is done by real people; and the same diversity among them that enriches the range of meanings also involves tensions and disagreements over purposes, organization, and processes in the curriculum.

The search for coherence involves long-standing issues in the politics of curriculum because it must involve decisions about what ideas or themes will hold the curriculum together. The question of what the "glue" is raises other questions, such as "Whose glue is it?" and "Who decides what the glue is?" Classical Humanists typically advocate a curriculum of separate, discrete subjects and mastery of what is contained within them (King and Brownell 1966). Such theory asserts that inherent and "ageless" concepts like truth and beauty (Adler 1982) hold these separate subjects together. Religious fundamentalists speak of coherence in terms of a curriculum that is permeated by sectarian values and interpretations that are always based on their own religious beliefs. Those who want the curriculum tied to economic ends would create coherence by continuously placing learning experiences in the context of utilitarian needs of business and industry. And progressives who are interested in democratic schools often call for a curriculum that is held together by contemporary social issues and the instrumental uses of knowledge and skill to take on those issues. Their claims for coherence are grounded in the real-life sources of those issues, their compelling significance, and the use of those issues as contexts for knowledge and skill.

Equally important as naming such differences is noting that the Conservative Restoration of the 1980s has limited the grounds for curriculum conversation mostly to the claims of Classical Humanists, fundamentalist religious demands, and economic interests and has limited the debate over differences to finding overlaps among those three (Apple 1993). Meanwhile, despite its close match with the conditions of coherence, the progressive view has been virtually deleted from curriculum conversations. Thus, the politics of curriculum fragmentation complicate the move toward coherence, especially because that move will require us to reclaim a wider range of views and to seek more than the not-so-peaceful co-existence they presently occupy in the curriculum.

The issue of coherence in the curriculum is multilayered in that the curriculum is experienced by many different groups: young people, teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, and the community at large. While absolutely essential, it is not sufficient to raise the issue of coherence only in terms of the perceptions of young people. The central location of the school as a primary social institution means that even though young people are its initial concern, the curriculum ought to have coherent meaning for others as well. Specifically, those most closely involved with the schools—professional educators—ought to be able to explain the curriculum without resorting to slick campaigns, public relations gimmicks, or esoteric language. Of course, this requires that they themselves have some coherent understanding of what the curriculum is about. Furthermore, silencing the voices of those outside the profession, including young people, when discussing the curriculum only detracts from the possibility for widely understood meaning and is just as much at issue here as is coherence within the curriculum itself.

However, as we concern ourselves with a multilayered understanding of how the curriculum is coherent, we must be careful not to confuse coherence with the more narrow idea of consistency (Buchman and Floden 1992). Much of what has passed for curriculum work in this century has been about the desire for consistency and control. Attempts to align objectives and tests, to mimic work subskills in vocational courses, to identify uniform courses and content, and to design sequential skill "maps" are but a few examples of the obsession with consistency. Moreover, much of the current talk about a national curriculum and tests, as well as that about "tech prep" programs, is but the latest in a long line of such examples. Though the search for coherence does not completely reject the desire for consistency, it has more to do with a sense of wholeness, meaning, and connectedness, while accepting the presence of contradictions, tensions, ambiguity, and diversity.

Distinguishing between coherence and consistency brings us back to the issue of whom the "coherence" is ultimately for. The previous examples of searching for consistency clearly emerge from a perceived need among adults. Consistency of school programs with college expectations, alignment of objectives and tests, and uniform and sequential subject designs have much more to do with the need for institutional order and political slogans than with the quality of learning experiences. Worse yet, it is quite possible to develop highly sophisticated schemes of consistency without creating coherence; we can systematize, align, and sequence all kinds of things without their necessarily making any kind of sense for young people.

Finally, the idea of a coherent curriculum is tied to the long-standing tension between general and specialized education. When we consider what ideas or themes might hold the curriculum together, we confront the question of whether to draw them from common, widely shared concerns or focus on specialized interests or aspirations. Advocates of the separate-subject curriculum, for example, claim that their approach has meaning in relation to the subject specialization found in higher education or academic occupations. Religious fundamentalists may claim meaning for their version of education

in relation to their narrow sectarian interests. And young people may insist that nothing has meaning outside of some personal hobby or aspiration. Yet each, in turn, involves increasing specialization that fragments individuals and reduces the curriculum to little more than self-interest.

The idea of coherence, on the other hand, seeks unity and connectedness on all fronts, not only among parts of the curriculum but among those who experience it. The sense of meaning to which coherence refers is, therefore, based on widely shared concerns in the larger society that the schools serve. In other words, particular curriculum arrangements may make sense to young people or one or another special-interest group but may not be sensible in terms of larger educational purposes. It is here, finally, that we may understand that coherence in the curriculum is not simply a methodological issue. It is a philosophical one as well.

The issues raised here are only some of those that are involved in thinking about a coherent curriculum. Yet they illustrate how important and complex such thinking is. And they hint at the politics and tensions that often arise—not the least of which is resistance from those who have deep loyalties to particular pieces of an incoherent curriculum and who may see the move toward coherence as a threat of territorial invasion.

Leaving these tensions for later "commentaries" in this book, we turn next to descriptions of some of the most widely known ideas and projects aimed at creating and sustaining curriculum coherence. Many readers will find here ideas and examples that are familiar in their own schools. That is fully expected because attempts at curriculum coherence, although not necessarily so named, have been of increasing interest among educators. Thus, these chapters may serve the important purpose of showing how to bring many of those very attempts into a coherent focus. For those who have not yet considered the crucial problem of curriculum incoherence, these chapters will undoubtedly offer a challenging set of ideas to consider.

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## **2. The Educated Person**

**by Ernest L. Boyer**

As we anticipate a new century, I am drawn back to questions that have, for generations, perplexed educators and philosophers and parents. What is an educated person? What should schools be teaching to students?

In searching for answers to these questions, we must consider first not the curriculum, but the human condition. And we must reflect especially on two essential realities of life. First, each person is unique. In defining goals, it is crucial for educators to affirm the special characteristics of each student. We must create in schools a climate in which students are empowered, and we must find ways in the nation's classrooms to celebrate the potential of each child. But beyond the diversity of individuals, educators also must acknowledge a second reality: the deeply rooted characteristics that bind together the human community. We must show students that people around the world share a great many experiences. Attention to both these aspects of our existence is critical to any discussion of what all children should learn.

What, then, does it mean to be an educated person? It means developing one's own aptitudes and interests and discovering the diversity that makes us each unique. And it means becoming permanently empowered with language proficiency, general knowledge, social confidence, and moral awareness in order to be economically and civically successful. But becoming well educated also means discovering the connectedness of things. Educators must help students see relationships across the disciplines and learn that education is a communal act, one that affirms not only individualism, but community. And for these goals to be accomplished, we need a new curriculum framework that is both comprehensive and coherent, one that can encompass existing subjects and integrate fragmented content while relating the curriculum to the realities of life. This curriculum must address the uniqueness of students' histories and experiences, but it also must guide them to understand the many ways that humans are connected.

Some schools and teachers are aiming to fully educate students, but most of us have a very long way to go in reaching this goal. Today, almost all students in U.S. schools still complete Carnegie units in exchange for a diploma. The time has come to bury the old Carnegie unit; since the Foundation I now head created this unit of academic measure nearly a century ago, I feel authorized to declare it obsolete. Why? Because it has helped turn schooling into an exercise in trivial pursuit. Students get academic "credit," but they fail to gain a coherent view of what they study. Education is measured by seat time, not time for learning. While curious young children still ask why things are any older children ask only, "Will this be on the test?" All students should be encouraged to ask "Why?" because "Why?" is the question that leads students to connections.

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In abandoning the Carnegie unit, I do not endorse the immediate adoption of national assessment programs; indeed, I think we must postpone such programs until we are much clearer about what students should be learning. The goal, again, is not only to help students become well informed and prepared for lifelong learning, but also to help them put learning into the larger context of discovering the connectedness of things. Barbara McClintock, the 1983 winner of the Nobel Prize for Physiology–Medicine, asserts: "Everything is one. There is no way to draw a line between things." Contrary to McClintock's vision, the average school or college catalog dramatizes the separate academic boxes.

Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences, compares scientists to artists, evoking the magnificent double helix, which broke the genetic code. He said the double helix is not only rational, but beautiful. Similarly, when scientists and technicians watch the countdown to a space launch, they don't say, "Our formulas worked again." They respond, "Beautiful!" instinctively reaching for the aesthetic term to praise a technological achievement. When physicist Victor Weisskopf was asked, "What gives you hope in troubled times?" he replied, "Mozart and quantum mechanics." Most schools, however, separate science and art, discouraging students from seeing the connections between them.

How, then, can we help students see relationships and patterns and gain understanding beyond the separate academic subjects? How can we rethink the curriculum and use the disciplines to illuminate larger, more integrated ends?

## **Human Commonalities**

In the 1981 book *A Quest for Common Learning*, I suggested that we might organize the curriculum not on the basis of disciplines or departments, but on the basis of "core commonalities." By core commonalities, I mean universal experiences that make us human, experiences shared by all cultures on the planet. During the past decade and a half, my thinking about this thematic structure has continued to evolve. I now envision eight commonalities that bind us to one another.

### *I. The Life Cycle.*

As life's most fundamental truth, we share, first, the experience that connects birth, growth, and death. This life cycle binds each of us to the others, and I find it sad that so many students go through life without reflecting on the mystery of their own existence. Many complete twelve or sixteen years of formal schooling not considering the sacredness of their own bodies, not learning to sustain wellness, not pondering the imperative of death.



In reshaping the curriculum to help students see connections, I would position study of "The Life Cycle" at the core of common learning. Attention would go to nutrition, health, and all aspects of wellness. For a project, each student would undertake the care of some life form.

My wife is a certified nurse-midwife who delivers babies, including seven grandchildren of our own. Kay feels special pain when delivering the baby of a teenage girl because she knows that she is delivering one child into the arms of another, and that both have all too often lived for nine months on soda and potato chips. Some young mothers first learn about the birth process between the sharp pains of labor.

Too many young women and young men pass through our process of education without learning about their own bodies. Out of ignorance, they suffer poor nutrition, addiction, and violence. "Maintaining children's good health is a shared responsibility of parents, schools, and the community at large," according to former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1986, p. 37). He urges elementary schools "to provide children with the knowledge, habits, and attitudes that will equip them for a fit and healthy life."

Study of the Life Cycle would encourage students to reflect sensitively on the mystery of birth and growth and death, to learn about body functions and thus understand the role of choice in wellness, to carry some of their emotional and intellectual learning into their relations with others, and to observe, understand, and respect a variety of life forms.

## *II. Language.*

Each life on the planet turns to symbols to express feelings and ideas. After a first breath, we make sounds as a way of reaching out to others, connecting with them. We develop a variety of languages: the language of words (written and spoken), the language of symbols (mathematics, codes, sign systems), and the language of the arts (aesthetic expressions in language, music, paint, sculpture, dance, theater, craft, and so on). A quality education develops proficiency in the written and the spoken word, as well as a useful knowledge of mathematical symbol systems and an understanding that the arts provide countless ways to express ourselves.

Our sophisticated use of language sets human beings apart from all other forms of life. Through the created words and symbols and arts, we connect to one another. Consider the miracle of any moment. One person vibrates his or her vocal cords. Molecules shoot in the direction of listeners. They hit the tympanic membrane; signals go scurrying up the eighth cranial nerve. From that series of events, the listener feels a response deep in the cerebrum that approximates the images in the mind of the speaker. Because of its power and scope, language is the means by which all other subjects are pursued.

The responsible use of language demands both accuracy and honesty, so students studying "Language" must also learn to consider the ethics of communication. Students live in a world where obscenities abound. They live in a world where politicians use sixty-second sound bites to destroy integrity. They live in a world where clichés

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substitute for reason. To make their way in this world, students must learn to distinguish between deceit and authenticity in language.

Writers and mathematicians have left a long and distinguished legacy for students to learn from. Through words, each child can express something personal. Through symbols, each child can increase the capacity to calculate and reason. Through the arts, each child can express a thought or a feeling. People need to write with clarity, read with comprehension, speak effectively, listen with understanding, compute accurately, and understand the communicative capabilities of the arts. Education for the next century means helping students understand that language in all its forms is a powerful and sacred trust.

### *III. The Arts.*

All people on the planet respond to the aesthetic. Dance, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture are languages understood around the world. "Art represents a social necessity that no nation can neglect without endangering its intellectual existence," said John Ruskin (Rand 1993). We all know how art can affect us. Salvador Dali's painting *The Persistence of Memory* communicates its meaning to anyone ever haunted by time passing. The gospel song "Amazing Grace" stirs people from both Appalachia and Manhattan. "We Shall Overcome," sung in slow and solemn cadence, invokes powerful feelings regardless of the race or economic status of singer or audience.

Archaeologists examine the artifacts of ancient civilization—pottery, cave paintings, and musical instruments—to determine the attainments and quality of a culture. As J. Carter Brown (1986) observes, "The texts of man's achievements are not written exclusively in words. They are written, as well, in architecture, paintings, sculpture, drawing, photography, and in urban, graphic, landscape, and industrial design."

Young children understand that the arts are language. Before they learn to speak, they respond intuitively to dance, music, and color. The arts also help children who are disabled. I once taught deaf children, who couldn't speak because they couldn't hear. But through painting, sculpture, movement, and rhythm, they found new ways to communicate.

Every child has the urge and capacity to be expressive. It is tragic that for most children the universal language of the arts is suppressed, then destroyed, in the early years of learning, because traditional teaching does not favor self-expression and school boards consider art a frill. This is an ironic deprivation when the role of art in developing critical thinking is becoming more widely recognized.

Jacques d'Amboise, former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet, movie star, and founder of the National Dance Institute, offers his view on how art fits into education: "I would take the arts, science and sports, or play, and make all education involve all of them. It would be similar to what kindergarten does, only more

sophisticated, right through life. All of the disciplines would be interrelated. You dance to a poem: poetry is meter, meter is time, time is science" (Ames and Peyser 1990).

For our most moving experiences, we turn to the arts to express feelings and ideas that words cannot convey. The arts are, as one poet has put it, "the language of the angels." To be truly educated means being sensitively responsive to the universal language of art.

#### *IV. Time and Space.*

While we are all nonuniform and often seem dramatically different from one another, all of us have the capacity to place ourselves in time and space. We explore our place through geography and astronomy. We explore our sense of time through history.

And yet, how often we squander this truly awesome capacity for exploration, neglecting even our personal roots. Looking back in my own life, my most important mentor was Grandpa Boyer, who lived to be one hundred. Sixty years before that, Grandpa moved his little family into the slums of Dayton, Ohio. He then spent the next forty years running a city mission, working for the poor, teaching me more by deed than by word that to be truly human, one must serve. For far too many children, the influence of such intergenerational models has diminished or totally disappeared.

Margaret Mead said that the health of any culture is sustained when three generations are vitally interacting with one another—a "vertical culture" in which the different age groups are connected. Yet in America today we've created a "horizontal culture," with each generation living alone. Infants are in nurseries, toddlers are in day care, older children are in schools organized by age. College students are isolated on campuses. Adults are in the workplace. And older citizens are in retirement villages, living and dying all alone.

For several years, my own parents chose to live in a retirement village where the average age was eighty. But this village had a day-care center, too, and all the three- and four-year-olds had adopted grandparents to meet with every day. The two generations quickly became friends. When I called my father, he didn't talk about his aches and pains, he talked about his little friend. And when I visited, I saw that my father, like any proud grandparent, had the child's drawings taped to the wall. As I watched the two of them together, I was struck by the idea that there is something really special about a four-year-old seeing the difficulty and courage of growing old. And I was struck, too, by watching an eighty-year-old being informed and inspired by the energy and innocence of a child. Exposure to such an age difference surely increases the understanding of time and personal history.

The time has come to break up the age ghettos. It is time to build intergenerational institutions that bring together the old and young. I'm impressed by the "grandteacher" programs in the schools, for example. In the new core curriculum, with a strand called "Time and Space," students should discover their own roots and complete an oral

history. But beyond their own extended family, all students should also become well informed about the influence of the culture that surrounds them and learn about the traditions of other cultures.

A truly educated person will see connections by placing his or her life in time and space. In the days ahead, students should study Western civilization to understand our past, and they should study non-Western cultures to understand our present and our future.

#### *V. Groups and Institutions.*

All people on the planet belong to groups and institutions that shape their lives. Nearly 150 years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, "We do not make a world of our own, but rather fall into institutions already made and have to accommodate ourselves to them." Every society organizes itself and carries on its work through social interaction that varies from one culture to another.

Students must be asked to think about the groups of which they are members, how they are shaped by those groups, and how they help to shape them. Students need to learn about the social web of our existence, about family life, about how governments function, about the informal social structures that surround us. They also must discover how life in groups varies from one culture to another.

Civic responsibility also must be taught. The school itself can be the starting point for this education, serving as a "working model" of a healthy society in microcosm that bears witness to the ideals of community. Within the school, students should feel "enfranchised." Teachers, administrators, and staff should meet often to find their own relationship to the institution of the school. And students should study groups in their own community, finding out about local government.

One of my sons lives in a Mayan village in the jungle of Belize. When my wife and I visit Craig each year, I'm impressed that Mayans and Americans live and work in very similar ways. The jungle of Manhattan and the one of Belize are separated by a thousand miles and a thousand years, and yet the Mayans, just like us, have their family units. They have elected leaders, village councils, law enforcement officers, jails, schools, and places to worship. Life there is both different and very much the same. Students in the United States should be introduced to institutions in our own culture and in other cultures, so they might study, for example, both Santa Cruz, California, and Santa Cruz, Belize.

We all belong to many groups. Exploring their history and functions helps students understand the privileges and the responsibilities that belong to each of us.

#### *VI. Work.*

We all participate, for much of our lives, in the commonality of work. As Thoreau reminds us, we both "live" and "get a living." Regardless of differences, all people on the

planet produce and consume. A quality education will help students understand and prepare for the world of work. Unfortunately, our own culture has become too preoccupied with consuming, too little with the tools for producing. Children may see their parents leave the house carrying briefcases or lunch pails in the morning and see them come home again in the evening, but do they know what parents actually do during the day?

Jerome Bruner (1971) asks: "Could it be that in our stratified and segmented society, our students simply do not know about local grocers and their styles, local doctors and their styles, local taxi drivers and theirs, local political activists and theirs? . . . I would urge that we find some way of connecting the diversity of the society to the phenomenon of school" (p. 7). A new, integrative curriculum for the schools needs to give attention to "Producing and Consuming," with each student studying simple economics, different money systems, vocational studies, career planning, how work varies from one culture to another, and with each completing a work project to gain a respect for craftsmanship.

Several years ago when Kay and I were in China, we were told about a student who had defaced the surface of his desk. As punishment, he spent three days in the factory where the desks were made, helping the woodworkers, observing the effort involved. Not surprisingly, the student never defaced another desk.

When I was Chancellor of the State University of New York, I took my youngest son, then eight, to a cabin in the Berkshires for the weekend. My goal: to build a dock. All day, instead of playing, Stephen sat by the lake, watching me work. As we drove home, he looked pensive. After several miles, he said, "Daddy, I wish you'd grown up to be a carpenter—instead of you-know-what!"

### *VII. Natural World.*

Though all people are different, we are all connected to the earth in many ways. David, my grandson in Belize, lives these connections as he chases birds, bathes in the river, and watches corn being picked, pounded into tortillas, and heated outdoors. But David's cousins in Boston and Princeton spend more time with appliances, asphalt roadways, and precooked food. For them, discovering connectedness to nature does not come so naturally.

When I was United States Commissioner of Education, Joan Cooney, the brilliant creator of Sesame Street, told me that she and her colleagues at Children's Television Workshop wanted to start a new program on science and technology for junior high school kids. They wanted young people to learn a little more about their world and what they must understand as part of living. Funds were raised, and 3-2-1 Contact went on the air. To prepare scripts, staff surveyed junior high school kids in New York City, asking questions such as "Where does water come from?"—which brought from some students the disturbing reply, "The faucet." They asked, "Where does light come from?" and heard, "The switch." And they asked, "Where does garbage go?" "Down the chute." These students' sense of connectedness stopped at the VCR or refrigerator door.

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Canadian geneticist David Suzuki, host of *The Nature of Things*, says: "We ought to be greening the school yard, breaking up the asphalt and concrete. . . . We have to give children hand-held lenses, classroom aquariums and terrariums, lots of field trips, organic garden plots on the school grounds, butterfly gardens, trees. Then insects, squirrels—maybe even raccoons and rabbits—will show up, even in the city. We've got to reconnect those kids, and we've got to do it very early. . . . Our challenge is to reconnect children to their natural curiosity" (Baron Estes 1993).

With all our differences, each of us is inextricably connected to the natural world. During their days of formal learning, students should explore this commonality by studying the principles of science, by discovering the shaping power of technology, and, above all, by learning that survival on this planet means respecting and preserving the earth we share.

### *VIII. Search for Meaning.*

Regardless of heritage or tradition, each person searches for some larger purpose. We all seek to give special meaning to our lives. Reinhold Niebuhr said, "Man cannot be whole unless he be committed, he cannot find himself, unless he find a purpose beyond himself." We all need to examine values and beliefs, and develop convictions.

During my study of the American high school, I became convinced ours is less a school problem and more a youth problem. Far too many teenagers feel unwanted, unneeded, and unconnected. Without guidance and direction, they soon lose their sense of purpose—even their sense of wanting purpose.

Great teachers allow their lives to express their values. They are matchless guides as they give the gift of opening truths about themselves to their students. I often think of three or four teachers, out of the many I have worked with, who changed my life. What made them truly great? They were well informed. They could relate their knowledge to students. They created an active, not passive, climate for learning. More than that, they were authentic human beings who taught their subjects and were open enough to teach about themselves.

Service projects instill values. All students should complete a community service project, working in day-care centers and retirement villages or tutoring other students at school. The North Carolina School of Science and Math develops an ethos of responsible citizenship. To be admitted, a child must commit to sixty hours of community service per summer and three hours per week during the school year (Beach 1992, p. 56).

Martin Luther King, Jr., preached: "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." I'm convinced the young people of this country want inspiration from this kind of larger vision, whether they come across it in a book or in person, or whether they find it inside themselves.

## Values, Beliefs, and Connections

What, then, does it mean to be an educated person? It means respecting the miracle of life, being empowered in the use of language, and responding sensitively to the aesthetic. Being truly educated means putting learning in historical perspective, understanding groups and institutions, having reverence for the natural world, and affirming the dignity of work. And, above all, being an educated person means being guided by values and beliefs and connecting the lessons of the classroom to the realities of life. These are the core competencies that I believe replace the old Carnegie units.

And all of this can be accomplished as schools focus not on seat time, but on students involved in true communities of learning. I realize that remarkable changes must occur for this shift in goals to take place, but I hope deeply that in the century ahead students will be judged not by their performance on a single test but by the quality of their lives. It is my hope that students in the classrooms of tomorrow will be encouraged to create more than conform, and to cooperate more than compete. Each student deserves to see the world clearly and in its entirety and to be inspired by both the beauty and the challenges that surround us all.

Above all, I pray that Julie and David, my granddaughter in Princeton and my grandson in Belize, along with all other children on the planet, will grow to understand that they belong to the same human family, the family that connects us all.

Fifty years ago, Mark Van Doren wrote, "The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity." The student, he says, who can begin early in life to see things as connected has begun the life of learning. This, it seems to me, is what it means to be an educated person.

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## **8. The Case for a Culturally Coherent Curriculum**

**by Beverly E. Cross**

In U.S. schools, the curriculum is bounded by culture in explicit (primarily content) and implicit (the structures of schools) ways. In almost every school, curriculum is built on the framework of Euro-American cultural experience, which is generally perceived to be neutral, universal, and appropriate. The typical curriculum works to "deculturalize" (Boateng 1990) children of minority groups, to make them part of a common Euro-American learning, perceiving, valuing, and acting community. The pedestrian perspective on which such a curriculum is based goes largely unchallenged, even though it involves questionable assumptions about power, superiority, domination, and inequality among peoples.

There is an alternative to a curriculum based on the assumptions of a single cultural group that sees itself as superior to and dominant over other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. We can develop a curriculum that reflects the heritage of all the children in our schools, one that promotes the study of diverse cultures. This new curriculum would acknowledge the cultural assumptions underlying it within a historical and sociocultural context.

### **A Question of Values**

Sixty years ago, Woodson (1933) asked, "Will schools remain a questionable factor in the life of minority people?" Some may be alarmed to know we still struggle with the basic question of equality of education that concerned Woodson in 1933. Others are untroubled by the way inequality is woven into the fabric of American society and into our schools. Despite efforts to create multicultural curriculums, too many children spend years in school without seeing their own race, culture, or ethnic group reflected in their studies. Still other children never explore or understand the diversity of our society. "Too often the best-case scenario is that cultural diversity is absent or invisible; the worst-case scenario is that it is actively resisted and denied" (Gay 1994, p. 72). Given the research linking a culturally relevant curriculum to the success of children in minority groups (Lomotey 1990, Boateng 1990, Gay 1994), these scenarios are extremely troubling. They are troubling also because they work against our need to understand and support one another as human beings, a goal that is perhaps the very essence of education.

Will current school reform efforts abolish these scenarios and ensure that schools educate rather than miseducate children? Throughout our history, periods of educational reform

have called into question what we as a country value. The current period of reform is no different. As debate ensues, questions of "power and control necessarily surface" (Jones-Wilson 1990, p. 31). In the United States, questions of value are debated within a context of power situated around disparate racial, cultural, and ethnic groups. Our decisions about what we value and consider ideal in our education system will in great part determine the attitudes and behaviors that we will pass on to our children and what our children will in turn pass on to their children. We need to determine how to center children within their cultural framework and to touch their psychological centers. If we do not, we will continue to destroy the spirit of children of minority groups (Asante 1992).

We need to take advantage of the current school reform movement to look beyond the dominant Euro-American cultural perspective and advance equitable consideration for other racial, ethnic, and cultural perspectives. Whether we can succeed in our efforts depends not so much on our knowledge and ability to redefine the curriculum, but on our will to do so.

### **Toward Culture to Achieve Curriculum Coherence**

Educators have a responsibility to ensure curricular equality for all children. Although numerous influences on schooling are beyond our control, we do oversee many things that significantly affect the lives of children. Even in times of great external influence and standardization, we have some control over shaping the curriculum. We have the opportunity to imagine, to experiment, and to use knowledge to bring about a more coherent curriculum. But do we have the courage to amass the social, political, and economic will to use culture to do so?

In *Going to School*, Lomotey (1990) analyzes four theories about why African American children are not succeeding in school: cultural differences, structural inequalities, social deficits, and genetic deficits. He suggests that cultural differences leave minority children out of the curriculum and that structural inequalities in schools produce inequalities in student achievement. He concludes that a synthesis of these two theories could be useful in understanding how to better educate minority children. Both theories are at the core of using culture to achieve a coherent curriculum. The curriculum must be reshaped around content (what is included in, and excluded from, the curriculum) and structure (how the curriculum shapes the school and determines what children experience). The curriculum should bring culture into students' educational experiences in a systematic, truthful, integrated, and meaningful manner.

Many educators recognize the influence of cultural differences and structural inequalities on the achievement of minority children. Reports based on a year of study in Ohio (Governor's Commission on Socially Disadvantaged Black Males 1990) and Milwaukee (Milwaukee Public Schools 1990) provide evidence. Both studies conclude that a cultural perspective lends support to advancing academic achievement for African American children. The reports suggest the following important considerations for schools: (1) a shift from a deficit view of African Americans to one that integrates into the curriculum

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their world view and cultural experiences; (2) coherent, consistent strategies to improve education; (3) an analysis of the role of the curriculum; (4) an analysis of the role of teachers; (5) an identification of supports needed; and (6) a focus on how minority children view themselves in our schools and in our society. These same considerations are essential to developing a coherent curriculum built on the framework of culture.

The first step in developing this curriculum is to rethink what curriculum is all about. Figure 8.1 offers two perspectives on curriculum that represent different points on a continuum of views rather than a dichotomy. In the next three sections, I'll explore the ideas listed in this figure and show that a coherent curriculum organized around the study of diverse cultures cannot evolve from the traditional linear view of curriculum; it must be the product of a dynamic process that engages children and teachers in constructing curriculum for themselves.

### **Figure 8.1. Curriculum Perspectives**

*-Traditional Views of Curriculum*

*-Alternative Views of Curriculum Coherence Through Culture*

Curriculum as exclusively a tangible document

Curriculum as the constructed and lived experiences of children and teachers

Curriculum as prescriptive, single, absolute, universal, and managed

Curriculum as socially constructed

Curriculum as multiple, inclusive, and subjective

Curriculum as a basis for inquiry by teachers and children investigating big ideas

Curriculum as the result of decisions

Curriculum as potentially liberating, rather than dominating

Curriculum as a compilation of fragmented and independent disciplines, boundaries, topics, and ideas

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Curriculum as a whole

Curriculum as interrelated experiences

Curriculum as framed around the human experience

Curriculum as value-free, neutral, and objective

Curriculum as value-bound, prioritized, subjective, and inequitable

Curriculum content as not universal (when focused on dominant cultures)

Curriculum as a means to become more truthful, representational, and valid

Curriculum as framed around multiple realities and views that ensure that children view the world through diverse eyes and diverse realities

Curriculum as neutral in context and time

Curriculum as contextually specific, time-situated, and culturally bound

Curriculum as the means to present and validate the entire human experience through analysis of diverse perspectives, contexts, and times

Curriculum as a means to control and dispense knowledge

Curriculum as a means of empowering children through their culture and the culture of others

Curriculum as what children understand and interpret

Curriculum as composed of static, linear knowledge

Curriculum as primarily dialogic, participatory, and engaging

Curriculum as driven by inquiry, reflection, questions, and challenges for increased understanding, action, and empowerment

Curriculum as relevant, pertinent, meaningful, and compelling

Curriculum as a means of stirring students' and teachers' imagination, intellect, emotion, and creativity

Curriculum as complex, lifelike, personally challenging, enriching

## **Developing Purposeful and Connected Curriculum**

Chapter 1 poses a question about what the curriculum means and what it is all about. Should the purpose of schools be to control and manage what children learn? Or should their purpose be to engage children in criticism and inquiry about knowledge and its relationship to the human experience? Embedded in these questions are curricular assumptions and somewhat oppositional views about what constitutes knowledge, what truth is, what children should learn in school, what reality is, and what recognition diversity will hold in the curriculum.

Culture can serve as a framework for rethinking some of our curricular confusion and ambivalence. It can be the whole that unifies and connects the content of the curriculum. It can aid us in moving away from the socially constructed boundaries of current curriculum. As culture moves to the foreground, the boundaries between the schools, the lives of children, and larger society become blurred; knowledge and skills come together, and cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development are viewed as inseparable parts of the whole person.

A curriculum organized around culture is based on two underlying beliefs: (1) children need to see themselves and others in the curriculum; (2) the identity of children is inseparable from the curriculum of schools and from cultural contexts. Imagine a curriculum experience that engages students in studying their own community before studying the people of their state, nation, and world. In this learning environment, students use multiple resources (community members, official records, tours, newspapers) to trace the economic, social, cultural, and political transitions of their community. They learn how these compare to larger contexts, what patterns are significant, and what human experiences were meaningful. Students become researchers, interviewers, and document analysts. They connect information in textbooks with their own findings about the people in their community. They hear and understand how various members of the community experience and view life and how they interpret the world.

To view culture as a framework for curriculum coherence is to think of the curriculum as a structure that allows children to view the world through multiple perspectives or "through diverse others' eyes" (Greene 1993, p. 13). By "learning to look through multiple perspectives, children may be helped to build bridges among themselves; attending to a range of human stories, they may be provoked to heal and to transform" (Greene 1993, p. 17). Children begin to understand themselves and each other, how their current experiences are connected to their past, and how they fit into a larger society. The curriculum becomes a means of connecting "book learning" to larger ideas, to humanity, to life. What could be more unifying, relevant, and pertinent than the human experience? What could give the curriculum more meaning and connect it to a larger purpose than a

grounding in culture? Through studying the diversity of cultures, children can come to understand what it means to know oneself and to be part of humanity.

### **Choosing Meaningful Content for the Curriculum**

Should the content of curriculum be designed to transmit a single set of knowledge valued by a single culture—knowledge that is fragmented and independent and viewed as value-free, neutral, and objective? Should the curriculum be used to teach cultural superiority? Or should the content of curriculum be multiple, diverse, integrated, and constructed by children and teachers? Should it be acknowledged as value- and culture-bound, subjective, and not universal? Should the curriculum lead children to understand their existence in society and their role in shaping their world? Should the curriculum be based on real-world problems, issues, and knowledge? Should it be focused on constructing meaning?

The curriculum of many schools is discipline-bound and often framed around "the manipulation of information, including propaganda and disinformation, primary tactics employed in the domination process" (Hilliard 1992, p. 12). Framing the curriculum around diverse cultures moves beyond such miseducation to recognize that curriculum is created as children and teachers relate to one another and negotiate meanings. Such a curriculum is recognized as multiple, inclusive, and subjective. Banks (1994) describes several approaches to multicultural curriculum, including the social action approach, which involves framing curriculum around big issues such as justice, freedom, equality, and human rights and moves toward using culture to achieve curriculum coherence. Through such a curriculum, teachers and children can begin to understand that "human culture is the product of the struggles of all humanity" (Hilliard 1992, p. 13), rather than a set of discrete, singular facts to be transmitted.

From the perspective of those seeking an integrated curriculum, culture is an important means of organizing and connecting studies. Through curriculum framed around multiple cultures, races, and ethnicities, children and teachers can begin to understand that "cultural difference is fundamental to appreciating individuality and humanity" (Gay 1994, p. 66). Theorists argue that including content about diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups is important in creating a multicultural curriculum, but they emphasize that it is only a first step (Banks 1994, Pine and Hilliard 1990).

A reality-based and problem-centered curriculum organized around culture can help children make sense of their experiences and connect them with other learnings. Through analysis, synthesis, criticism, and metacognition, children are led to derive greater meaning from what they experience through the curriculum. Moreover, through wrestling with complex, engaging, compelling, and often controversial matters, children begin to confront reality and truth and to make meaningful connections. Through understanding themselves and others, they begin to understand important concepts: truth, peace, conflict, human tensions, interdependence, responsibility, change, order, and justice—topics that transcend disciplines and relate to human existence.

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Imagine an integrated curriculum focused on the concept of perceptions and points of view. The questions guiding the curriculum might be: What is a perception or point of view? How is a perception or point of view developed and influenced? How do people react to each? How does each perception affect problem solving and decision making?

Since the integrated curriculum should have a major impact on students' lives and their thoughts about their existence, this unit could be designed to aid students in understanding how their lives inform their perceptions of others. Further, students could be aided in developing general skills for understanding their perceptions, communicating them, analyzing them, defending points of view, compromising, showing tolerance and respect for various perceptions and points of view, and making decisions.

### **Determining the Context of the Curriculum**

Should the curriculum be viewed as a tangible repository of static, linear knowledge that requires children to passively receive information without inquiry, challenge, and criticism? Or should the curriculum be viewed as a dynamic learning process constructed by teachers and students, a process that empowers students by helping them make connections between their culture and their schooling? The answers to these questions determine the context of the curriculum. A curriculum built on the framework of culture results in three context-related changes.

First, the context for curriculum becomes participatory, inquiry driven, dialogic, and critical. Hilliard (1992, p. 13)

suggests that to foster truth, we must facilitate in students the assumption of a critical orientation. [This] implies an awareness of all cultural alternatives and a thoughtful and honest examination of those alternatives. No cultural tradition can be regarded as immune to criticism.

Such a curriculum requires understanding that "culture is not static: neither is it necessarily positive or negative" (Nieto 1992, p. 279).

Second, the curriculum becomes situated around big ideas, real life, personal and societal issues, choices, and emotional issues. Fragmented facts are replaced with integrated ideas, concepts, issues, topics, tensions, arguments, and dilemmas. Passive children are replaced with inquiring, challenging, debating, and action-oriented children. Disciplines become connected through analysis, observation, thinking, contrasting and comparing, evaluation, judgment, and synthesis. The context for curriculum becomes shaped around connections between meaningful experiences and ideas. Children are expected to construct, examine, and extend meaning. They become constructors of knowledge. In the earlier example of an integrated unit on perceptions and points of view, students would likely be researchers, authors, debaters, mediators, persuaders, and evaluators.

Third, the context expands beyond the classroom and textbooks. Sources of knowledge are not limited to textbooks, teachers, and the written curriculum, but instead include the knowledge and experiences students gain outside of school. The curriculum expands to

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acknowledge students' past, present, and future. Families, communities, and schools are also more likely to be part of the curriculum.

### Malcolm X Academy

Malcolm X Academy in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, uses African and African American culture to achieve curriculum coherence. This focus is the result of a study of the academic achievement of African American males conducted by the school district (Milwaukee Public Schools 1990). The study prompted a district task force to make significant recommendations for improving the quality of education for minority children, including the following:

- restructuring schools
- developing strong self-/reading room/books/images/self-concepts among minority children
- developing alternative discipline programs
- revising curriculum in all disciplines to include the true story of minorities
- enhancing family support for minorities
- increasing parents and caregivers' abilities to support their children's education
- increasing the involvement and support of both the minority and Anglo-American communities in the education of all children

These recommendations reflect the underlying assumptions about why schools with traditional structures are not meeting the needs of minority children.

### Themes Shaping the Curriculum

Heritage and pride are two major themes shaping the ideals of Malcolm X Academy. The school's staff promotes these themes by weaving the concepts of self-esteem, self-awareness, cultural awareness, and academic success throughout the curriculum. They try also to create an aesthetically pleasing, sensitive, caring, safe, and positive environment.

The curriculum, tailored toward the cultural and social needs of the children, is composed of thematic units framed by organizing questions culled from the work of Asa Hilliard (1990): Who are my people? What have my people done? What are my people like (cultural description)? What was done to my people? What is the status of my people? A statement in the school manual reads:

The infusion of the curriculum with African-American content is the largest battle being fought in the education of black children. The heavy munitions in this fight are the two buzzwords Afrocentrism and multiculturalism. Each is loaded with enough emotional weight to start yet another academic war (Malcolm X Academy 1994).

The school district's mandated curriculum is adapted and enriched with African American culture and heritage. The school staff explains that this focus results from "our belief that ©Bean, J. (1995) What is a Coherent Curriculum? The 1995 ASCD Yearbook "reprinted by permission". The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is a worldwide community of educators advocating sound policies and sharing best practices to achieve the success of each learner. To learn more, visit ASCD at [www.ascd.org/](http://www.ascd.org/)



African American children must understand that language arts, history, mathematics, science are a part of their rich cultural background." The curriculum is aimed at decreasing generalizations, perceptions, ethnocentrism, sensationalism, and exploitation through careful study of Africa, America, and the people of both.

The mandated curriculum is enriched, strengthened, and diversified as children study African American entrepreneurs, careers in which African Americans are underrepresented, and the communities in which students now live. Children learn the "Black National Anthem" in addition to "The Star-Spangled Banner." They participate in rites of passage that direct them to recognize their inner resources, choose elders who will guide them, and become initiated into their culture. They design and display shields representing aspects of society. They learn about the Kente cloth and Kwanzaa. Extracurricular activities include a culturally enriched media center, Kuumba Dancers, Imani Gospel Choir, Damali Art Gallery, History Makers/Mentors Program, African American Festival, Male/Female Summits, and Parent Conference Center. All of these curriculum expectations are tied to the aim of students becoming responsible decision makers, critical thinkers, and socially and politically active adults.

### **A Teacher's Story**

The following piece by Anne White, a teacher at Malcolm X Academy, paints a clear picture of the creativity and commitment of teachers who have accepted the challenge of building a curriculum on the framework of culture.

*I teach at Malcolm X Academy, a middle school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Our approximately 600 children are 99.9 percent African American. Our school became an African American Immersion curriculum school in 1991 as the result of a task force report showing that schools operating within the traditional structure were not meeting the educational needs of African American males. Our curriculum is designed to promote self-esteem, self-awareness, cultural awareness, and academic success. Our purpose at Malcolm X is not one of ethnic superiority, but of excellence. We strive to legitimate the African and African American story. Our curriculum is not a "feel good" curriculum; it is designed to tell the whole truth.*

*My own approach to the curricular integration process has its roots in two awakenings in my life. The first occurred in 1991 when I heard Asa Hilliard speak on the Portland Baseline Essays. The second awakening was when I read an article by Gloria Ladson-Billings describing research she had conducted on what makes effective teachers. She concluded that all the teachers who were perceived to be effective were engaged in what she refers to as "culturally relevant teaching."*

*I began to feel I needed to be reeducated to be culturally relevant and to be effective and truthful. I now approach my curriculum planning in three ways to achieve a curriculum that is coherently organized around culture. First, I analyze what I know about African and African America culture and how it fits into my curriculum. Then I look at my mandated curriculum to determine what I need to teach. I then analyze what I*

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*need to learn in order to integrate my curriculum with the mandated curriculum. For example, I determine what I need to learn to replace the missing pages of history or the silent/silenced voices. Then I look to the experts like Hilliard, Banks, and Ladson-Billings.*

*My personal approach to curriculum has its foundation in the classroom format. I use a multifaceted approach. I focus the curriculum on events, concepts, and topics. I am mindful of whose perspective I am presenting. To provide diverse perspectives, I use what I loosely refer to as supplementary materials that are correlated with the mandated text. These materials include, for example, *Black History for Beginners*, *Lessons from History: A Celebration in Blackness* and *The African-American Experience: A History*. I ensure I use diverse historical accounts through *The Unfinished March*, *A Glorious Age in Africa*, *Quest of the African Past*, and *Great Kingdoms of the African Past*.*

*Next I organize my curriculum around schoolwide themes: *Who Am I and Who are My People?*; *Values/Rites of Passage*; and *Entrepreneurship and Community, Social, Political Responsibility*. An example of how I approach the second and third themes includes discussing the Kwanzaa values, exploring the political process and its importance to the African American community, analyzing grass-roots organizations as a means to achieving social justice, and promoting volunteerism.*

*Finally, my curriculum also involves special topics. Some examples include: *Nations of Africa*; *Nonviolence and Direct Action*; *Malcolm X Learning Stations*; *Thank You Africa: African Culture Story*.*

*The bottom line of any curriculum effort is the impact it has on children's performance and attitude. We've had test scores go up slightly and the school climate improve. These are signs to build on as we continue to create a coherent curriculum organized around culture.*

## **Lessons from Malcolm X Academy**

What can we learn from Malcolm X Academy about achieving curriculum coherence through the framework of culture? The lessons are significant; and some reiterate what we know about the importance of culture, identity, and schooling.

1. Children need to see and benefit from seeing themselves in the curriculum. Children know whether they are valued through their representation in the curriculum. Adding to the traditional curriculum content on the contributions, holidays, and heroes of various cultural, racial, and ethnic groups does not make children feel truly valued. A curriculum rebuilt on the diversity of culture, however, shows children that they are important to the school and that they can contribute to what occurs there.

At Malcolm X Academy, cultural identity is integrated into a curriculum that is explicitly framed around diverse cultures. In particular, African and African American heritage and culture are emphasized, in addition to the traditional curriculum of American schools.

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The school staff believes the integration connects self-esteem, self-awareness, and cultural awareness to the academic success of its predominately African American student body. The identity, competence, and psychological and academic development of the children are interrelated through the curriculum. For example, the students study African shields, languages, and cultural practices. The band plays African instruments, and their dancers perform African dance. The students complete Rites of Passage at predetermined stages of their program. Families, community members, and businesses are involved in educational activities to further expose children to the work and community involvement of their own cultural, ethnic, and racial members.

2. Children benefit from seeing people of diverse cultures in the curriculum. A curriculum framed around diverse cultures allows children to learn about themselves and about others. Children learn to view the world through multiple lenses; they learn that they count and that everyone counts; and they begin to understand multiple social, cultural, and value systems.

The children at Malcolm X Academy benefit from studying various American and African cultures. These cultural groups are used to open doors to the study of other groups through social, political, and economic connections within a global context. Students learn how different groups experience the world and how these experiences are interrelated and distinguished. They learn to view the world through a variety of eyes. The experiences of people and their existence in the world become central to the curriculum. Learning to understand diverse viewpoints prepares students to examine what they can do to create a more equitable and humane world. The school is furthering this goal by developing plans to institute student service projects that will increase students' sense of community, social responsibility, community involvement, ownership, and pride. As students develop this sense in their own communities, they will expand its use to larger, global contexts.

3. The multicultural practices now used in many schools fall short of ensuring that the curriculum does not result in the "miseducation of minority children." Achieving curriculum coherence through culture moves beyond the addition of cultures to a complete transformation of the curriculum. Efforts to construct an integrated curriculum framed around diverse perspectives and big ideas move schools closer to becoming a learning community that is better able to meet the educational needs of all children. A curriculum built on the study of various cultures, ethnicities, and races can lead children to understand the human experience and to understand important ideas like freedom, equality, and justice.

The children at Malcolm X Academy study cultures in an effort to seek truth about people and their existence in the world. Thus, their studies are primarily guided not by textbooks, but by numerous resources, research, and analyses. The curriculum is shaped around themes that are broad in scope and integrated throughout the academic year and the grade levels. The schoolwide themes unify students and teachers in the school. Individual teams of teachers develop curriculum and subthemes to fit the educational aims and needs of the students. This design requires daily curriculum planning, which

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promotes systematic integration of cultures, rather than the use of short, discrete units that often trivialize and distort a culture.

4. School reform efforts benefit from refocusing on the identity of children as a central ideal, rather than viewing children as future workers. Viewing curriculum and children in a utilitarian way distorts both. School reform will be only as successful as its ability to advance equality and achievement for all children. In a curriculum organized around culture rather than preparation for work, job skills are replaced by truth, morality, consciousness, critical inquiry, social action, equality, justice, and freedom.

At Malcolm X Academy, students study what has happened to people through social injustice and inequality. They learn about the struggles of people from a historical perspective and about their struggles today. For example, students study the historical and cultural patterns in employment trends in different communities and among different groups of people. They develop systems to understand the social, political, and economic impact of employment, unemployment, entrepreneurship, and occupational access within various communities and groups of people. They begin to understand the influence their own lives may have on these issues. And they begin to develop social action commitments through the curriculum and experiences of the school.

5. Viewing curriculum as singular and standardized endangers curriculum equality for all children. The current efforts to control and standardize curriculum through uniform content and assessment conflict with diversity at multiple levels. Diversity of ideas, of children, and of curriculum does not fit with standardized notions. Yet standardization and uniformity are embedded in many reform ideals. The reform movement of the last few decades will fall short of achieving its targeted educational excellence if it ignores the role of cultural diversity in schooling.

At Malcolm X Academy, the move to an integrated curriculum, teacher teaming for curriculum planning and teaching, the use of small groups, the idea of teachers as advisors to students, participatory learning, team-based learning, and problem-based learning are reform efforts systematically tied to a curriculum built on the framework of culture. Culture is the center around which these reform efforts support and organize learning experiences for students.

6. Structuring curriculum around culture has implications for children's life in classrooms, for what children will learn, and for what they want for their future and the future of others. To achieve equal educational outcomes for all children, the curriculum must complement rather than oppose diverse cultures (Hale-Benson 1990, p. 210). When cultures frame the coherent curriculum, the potential emerges to concurrently validate, make relevant, and improve the quality of the education experience for all children. To realize this potential, educators must really know children, not just have a cursory understanding of generalized developmental theories. They must understand children as sociocultural beings. They must recognize that children bring knowledge to the classroom with them, that they are members of cultural groups that

influence how they think, perceive, act, and value. They must further understand and develop an appreciation for the interrelationships of culture and the curriculum.

At Malcolm X Academy, the curriculum is designed to build the self-esteem and social competence of students. Students and their existence in the world are constant backdrops to the study of subjects such as algebra, technology, the arts, and writing. One priority for the staff continues to be restructuring the mathematics, science, and technology curriculum for better instructional integration and expanded cultural and historical understanding of these subjects. As active learners and inquirers, students engage in inquiry, validation of truth, and connecting what they learn. As they do so, they see the purpose of school differently. They see its relevance, and they see it as a place where their learning is at the center. Students who have this view of school are prepared to pursue additional education, to interact within a diverse society, to find out how they fit into society, and to think about the rest of their lives.

7. Improvement of teachers' knowledge and skills should occur, along with the development of a curriculum organized around culture. To teach a coherent curriculum organized around culture, the nation's teaching force needs to understand diverse cultures and different views of the world. They need to understand their own cultural being. They need to ignite in their students an interest in studying cultures different from their own. And they need to learn how to develop coherent curriculum." To achieve these improvements, we will likely have to revamp teacher education programs and offer new forms of professional development to inservice teachers.

At Malcolm X Academy, the teachers are involved in professional development at various levels. They are engaged in extensive curriculum development. They are taking university courses in African studies, developing integrated curriculum, teaching African American adolescents, conducting action research, and analyzing African Americans in American society. They are also involved in professional associations. Many teachers attend and present at conferences, workshops, and institutes to expand their preparedness to teach a culturally coherent curriculum. And they meet daily in teams to develop curriculum, to monitor integration, and to assist one another with curriculum planning. The school has an extensive professional library, offers internships in community-based organizations to teachers, and provides courses on home relations for parents and teachers together. This model for professional development not only serves the school but also informs the preparation of future teachers through school-university collaboration.

### **What Will Our Answer Be?**

Let's return to our opening question: "Will schools remain a questionable factor in the life of minority people?" (Woodson 1933). This question is most important, for we are at a unique historical moment in educating children of minority groups. Despite years of research, study, and reform, we may have to answer yes to this question. If we fail to consider the relationship between culture and curriculum, if we continue to deny the role

of race, ethnicity, and culture in the curriculum, we will have to answer, "Yes, the schools are still not adequately serving minority students."

"Schools need to accommodate diversity in more humane and sensitive ways than they have in the past" (Nieto 1992, p. 272). To continue to deny the significance of culture in the curriculum, especially the culture of minority groups, is to "foster mediocre classroom experiences and exacerbate existing barriers to the attainment of academic success" for minority children (Lomotey 1990, p. 6). We must acknowledge that the curriculum has a profound and lasting effect on children. We must also recognize that children and who they are have a profound effect on the curriculum. Children and curriculum mutually inform each other. Educators must be agents in recognizing culture's potential for making the curriculum coherent. We must also recognize our professional responsibility to garner the political will and moral imperative to support these ideals and to affect the political, social, and policy systems for educational change. The education of children from minority groups is the most critical issue facing educators today. Let's use our imagination, creativity, and knowledge to make a difference. All of America's children deserve no less.

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