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## It's the Curriculum, Stupid: There's Something Wrong with It

***Educators, parents, and employers all seem to agree on the types of skills they believe students should be developing. But Mr. Brown finds that the traditional curriculum, divided up into separate subjects, neither engages students nor prepares them for productive lives. He believes that the answer to both problems is to have students design their own curricula.***

*By Dave F. Brown*

WHILE waiting in Chicago for my connecting flight, I wandered over and picked up a *USA Today* to browse through the day's national events. I seldom get past the first section before I drop the paper and return to reading something more substantial. But this time a figure at the bottom of the "Money" section caught my eye.<sup>1</sup> The heading for the figure was "Are Schools Preparing Students to Meet Employers' Needs?" This survey of 450 business and political leaders, conducted by Duffey Communications, yielded the following results:

1. Seventy percent of those surveyed said, "No, schools are not preparing students to meet employers' needs."
2. Twenty percent said, "Yes, schools are preparing students to meet employers' needs."
3. The remaining 10% reported that schools are "somewhat" preparing students to meet employers' needs.

For the next hour, I began to reflect on many educational trends, issues, theories, and philosophies that could play a role in really answering that question. But I kept returning to two central questions: 1) What outcomes do employers want graduates to have achieved as a result of their years of schooling? and 2) If educators knew the answer to this question, how could they ensure that their students achieved those outcomes?

I realize that supposing educators want answers to these two questions assumes that at least one valued outcome of schooling is to provide an efficient work force to ensure the continued success of capitalism. If teachers and parents, for argument's sake, genuinely believe that it is educators' responsibility to prepare students for a life of "meeting employers' needs," then we're going to have to better examine what it is that we choose to teach students. That is, what should be in the curriculum to ensure that students have the knowledge to prepare them for a life of employment?

To some extent, I fear I am treading on hallowed ground. James Beane summarized the challenge of questioning what is traditionally taught with his comment, "Changing the curriculum is like moving a graveyard; no one wants to disturb the dead."<sup>2</sup> Yet my recent research with the middle-level curriculum has led me to a renewed view -- both philosophical and practical -- of how to create appropriate curricula for students, no matter what the desired outcomes.

### Choosing Meaningful Outcomes

Educators and parents have what I consider to be a reasonable sense of what students should learn to prepare them for productive and successful lives. For four consecutive summers, I surveyed a sample of middle-level teachers to determine their views on the specific skills that students need prior to entering adult employment.<sup>3</sup> The prioritized list of their responses follows:

1. Critical-thinking skills

2. Problem-solving strategies and effective decision-making skills
3. Creative-thinking processes
4. Effective oral and written communication skills
5. Basic reading, mathematics, and writing abilities
6. Knowledge of when and how to use research to solve problems
7. Effective interpersonal skills
8. Technology skills
9. Knowledge of good health and hygiene habits
10. Acceptance and understanding of diverse cultures and ethnicities
11. Knowledge of how to effectively manage money
12. Willingness, strategies, and ability to continue learning

Carol Smith noted that parents and teachers in Vermont who were asked to prioritize outcomes for students developed a similar list.<sup>4</sup> Kathy Emery and Susan Ohanian quote the words of “Car Talk” co-host Tom Magliozzi about what students should learn in school: Education really ought to help us understand the world we live in. This includes flora, fauna, cultures, governments, religions, money, advertising, buildings, cities, and especially people. Then it should help us cope with the world. And in the process, it would be nice if it helped us to become good, kind, empathetic people.<sup>5</sup>

Magliozzi's thoughts, coupled with the surveys of teachers and parents, provide educators with a range of outcomes that is better focused than the traditional curricula that students are subjected to each school year. Traditional curricular delivery systems suffer from trying to present too many facts in a completely isolated manner. Marion Brady described the problems with such an approach:

The result is the perpetuation of an intellectually unmanageable, “mile wide and inch deep,” artificially compartmentalized curriculum, a curriculum acceptable not because it is theoretically sound, not because it is intellectually challenging, not because it meets individual societal needs, but because its familiarity blocks recognition of its fundamental inadequacy.<sup>6</sup>

Brady suggests that schools must design learning experiences that integrate all content areas in such a way as to encourage “a thorough understanding of the seamless, systematic nature of knowledge -- and the ability to use that understanding to live life more fully and intelligently.”<sup>7</sup>

I imagine that business leaders want the same general outcomes as parents and teachers, particularly since some parents are business leaders. However, Emery and Ohanian present evidence that the essential skills identified by teachers and parents may not be necessary or even valued because of the types of jobs available in the current economy. They cite data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that indicate that between 1992 and 2005, “the largest increases in terms of numbers of jobs [were], in descending order: retail sales workers, registered nurses, cashiers, truck drivers, waiters and waitresses, nursing aides, janitors, food preparation workers, and systems analysts.”<sup>8</sup> I insist, though, that anyone who has either worked these jobs or had contact with those who do might agree that such occupations require the same essential skills identified by parents and teachers.

Anyone who browses through the classified ads in a local newspaper would notice a match between the skills and qualities that employers are seeking and those which teachers and parents hope children will gain. One company promised the following to future employees: “This company . . . empowers you to innovate, to explore, and to make decisions as part of a global team. . . .” Another ad noted, “Requirements for this position include . . . leadership ability, team player, meeting tight deadlines, multitasking, technical writing and editing . . . ,” and a third required “excellent writing skills, research and data analysis skills.”<sup>9</sup> Donald Graves interviewed a businessman who provided this list of required traits: “They [employees] need to have initiative. I guess I'd call it drive. Next I want them to be creative, to come up with a different twist to solving problems. Finally, I need for them to be team players.”<sup>10</sup>

These traits sounds quite similar to those listed by the teachers I work with each summer. That list, however, certainly

leads to more than mere preparation for working. I believe that, as teachers, we must be responsible for preparing young people for the types of critical thinking and decision making that have little to do with one's work and more to do with one's personal and civic lives. I prefer that schools prepare children to be social leaders, not blind followers; free, critical thinkers, not easily brainwashed dolts; creative thinkers, not rote assembly-line workers; and actively engaged members of a political community, not apathetic, apolitical zombies. Those outcomes may be different from what the business and political leaders desire, though I hope not. As Gerald Bracey put it, "Schools should not prepare students for the world of work. . . . Schools should prepare children to live rich, generous lives in the hours they are freed from work."<sup>11</sup> I believe that schools can create empathetic and responsible critical thinkers who are also productive adults -- in short, the kinds of people who meet the needs of all of society, not just those of employers.

But when I read those newspaper ads, I always ask myself: Which part of the curricula in our high schools prepares students to engage in such advanced thinking, research, and teamwork? I wish this question were on the minds of all those who ultimately decide what all students should learn in school.

And in fact some students don't believe they are ready for work as a result of their schooling. A recent survey of approximately 1,500 high school graduates revealed that 40% do not believe they are adequately prepared for the demands of work or college.<sup>12</sup> Many adolescents' perceptions of the significance of the curricula they are asked to study are also less than positive.

## The Problem with Current Curricular Design

It's no surprise to me that a small proportion of students choose to leave high school before graduating. Staying in school through 13 years requires considerable patience, in part because of the way students are so often "inactively engaged" cognitively with the material. Students tend to agree with this negative view of curricular offerings. One middle school student described the absurdity of his social studies curriculum:

I don't think when we grow up anybody will come up on the street and say, "Excuse me, do you know who Constantine was?" We're learning about Constantine and his son, and his son's son, and his son's cousin. They didn't do anything in history, but we learned about it.<sup>13</sup>

Ceci Lewis, Scott Christian, and Eva Gold conducted extensive interviews with two high school seniors. When asked about curriculum, one of those students, Steve, remarked:

To clear up any confusion, the curriculum . . . for Buena High School in particular consists of classes, needed credits that are considered to make us the best possible student. . . . The curriculum they chose is teaching the students in the way they think could best help the student along into higher learning . . . in some cases that's not so. My life is a perfect example.<sup>14</sup>

The other student interviewee, Amy, added:

Ever since kindergarten, I have become increasingly disappointed with the lessons taught within the classroom. Of course a certain amount of math, English, history, and science is necessary for later in life, but so is a certain amount of interaction with other people. My classroom education has fallen short of giving me the most vital skills needed to survive in the world today. It has failed to teach me how to communicate with others; in short, it has failed to teach me any type of social skills.<sup>15</sup>

Jeffrey Shultz and Alison Cook-Sather, in introducing the volume in which these students' comments appear, note that one of the central themes among the several students that they interviewed "is that students want school to be engaging. For these students, education isn't just about learning math, social studies, or science; it is also about being active partners in their own learning -- contributing their ideas, being listened to, making choices, in their studies."<sup>16</sup>

If anyone doubts the meaninglessness of most secondary school curricula to most students, then please visit your local high school or middle school and observe the interactions among students -- if you can find any. Better yet, ask high school graduates what they recall about their high school curricula. When I ask the question of my college students, they usually recall only those experiences that were highly interactive -- that is, the times when the students were responsible for producing knowledge, conducting research, or engaging in meaningful problem solving. In the aforementioned survey of almost 1,500 high school students, only 26% of those who went straight to college and 20% who went directly into the work force say that they felt challenged during their high school careers.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps that finding might lead one to inquire, "What impact did the curricula you studied have on your feelings of being challenged?"

Of course, I know I'm generalizing about the passivity that exists in high school classrooms. Many high school and middle school teachers create a great deal of excitement and motivation through the strategies they use to engage students. But they do so despite a stifling curriculum. Even with the best of teachers, I suspect that most students find little in what they are asked to study that is connected to their lives. I believe that to be the primary problem with curricula: they are too disconnected from adolescents' lives to have meaning for them.

That leaves this significant question to be answered: What can be done to help students connect with the curricula? And the obvious follow-up question: Which curricula will actually encourage students to develop the essential skills and strategies that lead to productive adulthood?

## Curricular Decisions Belong to Students

Long ago, in what seems like a fantasyland compared to the current standards-driven mania that besets American education, John Dewey outlined the problems with the traditional top-down curriculum:

It imposes adult standards, subject matter, and methods upon those who are only growing slowly toward maturity. The gap is so great that the required subject matter [and] the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacity of the young. But the gulf between the mature or adult products and the experience and abilities of the young is so wide that the very situation forbids much active participation by pupils in the development of what is taught.<sup>18</sup>

Dewey spoke those words in 1938. Welcome to the past. Beane has addressed how to genuinely connect curricula to the needs and interests of our students.<sup>19</sup> He has described a curricular design that is invested in students' lives; it is known as "curriculum integration." Simply stated, it is this: students and teachers build the curriculum each year based on students' questions.<sup>20</sup>

To begin with, each student is asked two questions: "What questions and concerns do you have about yourself?" and "What questions and concerns do you have about the world?" Students spend the first few weeks of the year working collaboratively to narrow each individual's lists of questions down to a small set of central questions to study during the academic year. By virtue of being organized "around significant problems and issues," the resultant curriculum, Beane notes, "enhanc[es] the possibilities for personal and social integration."<sup>21</sup> A definitive difference between curriculum integration and all other so-called integrated curricula is that in curriculum integration no subject-area designations exist. These are not hypothetical themes contrived by teachers; instead, they are a set of genuine student-generated concerns.

When they engage in planning for curriculum integration, separate groups of students will often develop similar sets of themes to investigate. Among the most common are: 1) environmental issues, 2) making and managing money, 3) questions about future technologies, 4) creating a peaceful world, 5) prejudice, 6) who has power and how it is managed, 7) crime and violence, and 8) What does the future hold for me?

I believe that the ultimate aim of much of traditional secondary schooling is for students to understand the significance of these same themes. The difference is that with traditional curricula the ideas do not seem to be as connected to students' lives as they are when students study these themes as a result of their own curiosity.

The way in which students dissect these general themes into specific topics of study during the year is determined through weekly small-group meetings. Within these groups, students are involved in deciding which specific questions they want to answer, how they will study a particular topic, how to collect information on the topic, and how they will present their findings to the rest of the class. Students are variously engaged in conducting their own research, finding guest speakers, planning field trips, collecting data, conducting surveys, and making presentations to the entire school or to public audiences.<sup>22</sup>

At many recent conferences of the National Middle School Association, Gert Nesin, Barbara Brodhagen, Carol Smith, and a few other middle-level teachers and researchers have conducted the first stage of curriculum integration with a group of middle-level students who have never been engaged in choosing the curriculum.<sup>23</sup> Each time this occurs, these students' classroom teachers are surprised by their own students' ability to ask such sophisticated questions. It's as if teachers don't believe that adolescents are capable of such independent thought, creativity, or curiosity. Yet, year after year in several schools across the U.S., students engage in curriculum integration.<sup>24</sup>

## What Are Students Learning?

For several reasons, curriculum integration is a good fit for a middle school or high school. If we examine the activities required in curriculum integration, it becomes clear that students are engaged in what David Hamburg described as the primary purposes of a middle-level curriculum: acquiring the strategies needed to construct their own knowledge, developing valuable questioning strategies, building on human relationships, and gaining a sense of belonging to a group.<sup>25</sup> Another valuable aspect of curriculum integration is that it meshes well with middle-schoolers' learning propensities. Cynthia Mee, in her interviews with 2,000 young adolescents, noted that they are extremely curious and enjoy asking questions.<sup>26</sup> And of course the very basis of curriculum integration is students' need to ask questions about significant issues that affect their lives.

Beane insists that the primary purpose of engaging students in curriculum integration is to provide them with a genuine democratic education.<sup>27</sup> Entrusting students with opportunities to ask meaningful questions, permitting them to work collaboratively with teachers and fellow students, and using their chosen themes as the foundation for a year of learning are all versions of the democratic actions that form the basis of the political culture of the U.S. Curriculum integration involves students in genuine democratic activities that can yield solutions to practical problems they experience in their classrooms. What better method could there be for learning about democracy than living it in a classroom?

Curriculum integration provides daily opportunities for students to use thought processes as they plan, do research, and report on what they learn. Students engaged in curriculum integration think critically and creatively in evaluating sources of information, in choosing how to present research, and in evaluating their peers' and their own presentations. They participate in daily research processes to find information and design appropriate experiments to test their own hypotheses. And they solve problems ranging from determining how to present information to figuring out how to compromise with other team members.

Students who participate in curriculum integration work out their differences of opinion, choose research partners, learn how to negotiate, and practice reaching consensus -- all vital social skills required in adult life. Curriculum integration teachers -- more accurately called facilitators -- don't worry about whether students are motivated by the curriculum. The motivation comes automatically with having chosen the questions. Classroom management problems seldom arise, perhaps primarily because of the high levels of engagement and motivation of students studying something of their own choosing.

## **Does Curriculum Integration Prepare Students for the Future?**

I wanted to know whether students who engaged in curriculum integration thought they were better prepared for adult life than those who experienced a more traditional curriculum. Through extensive interviews that I conducted with 13 "graduates" of three separate years of an eighth-grade curriculum integration experience, I discovered that these students do indeed achieve meaningful outcomes.<sup>28</sup>

I asked students whether a curriculum integration experience was more motivating than a traditional classroom. All 13 agreed that curriculum integration is more motivating because of the opportunity to design the curricula themselves and the significance that involvement gives to the curricula. Seven students noted that the challenge of maintaining group cohesiveness and harmony also made the experience motivating.

I was particularly concerned with the growth in students' thought processes. I wondered whether they believed that curriculum integration had made them better thinkers than traditional curricula would have. All but one agreed that the curriculum integration experience had improved their abilities more than traditional curricula would have in the areas of creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, and problem solving. They also believed that curriculum integration was better than traditional curricula in helping them improve their research abilities.

Since many adults value the development of students' social skills during their years in school, I asked the 13 students whether they thought that participating in curriculum integration had improved their ability to work with others, and 10 said that their overall social skills had improved as a result of the experience.

I also wondered if the curriculum integration experience had helped students maintain their growth in the traditional content areas of mathematics, writing, and reading. Students received their mathematics instruction in this particular school from traditional courses, since there was concern among the facilitators (i.e., teachers) that students would not be exposed to enough higher-level mathematical principles if they chose the curricula themselves. All of the respondents, however, affirmed that the curriculum integration class had improved their writing skills because of the extensive journal and report writing involved. As part of the process, students received weekly feedback about their writing and were encouraged to revise papers until they were accurately written. Students were required to read a total of 25 books during

the year. Some of those books were assigned reading while others were self-chosen or connected to research topics. Students were responsible for critiquing each book they had read. Once again, all 13 students agreed that this experience improved their reading skills more than work in a traditional classroom would have.

One distinct advantage of curriculum integration is that its flexibility with regard to time allows students to examine issues in depth. Extended learning time made possible longer engagement with challenging topics, and so genuine understanding became more likely. This in itself was probably an important factor in improving students' thinking.

## The Results Everyone Wants

So much of the focus of education policy recently has been on standardized testing. Many Americans, especially politicians, seem to be highly concerned with whether students' scores on these tests reach the level deemed "proficient." That specific and often unrealistic goal and the fact that standardized tests measure such limited skills and knowledge mean that public school teachers aren't able to effectively prepare students to live meaningful, productive future lives. The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development recently reported that New York will be the first state to institute a test designed to measure high school seniors' preparedness for work.<sup>29</sup> The test, which will be voluntary, will measure students' knowledge of how to communicate, negotiate, and use decision-making skills. This is an assessment that has the potential to alter in a positive manner the method by which curricula are delivered.

Since the current culture of assessing students focuses only on basic skills, it is imperative to publicize the meaningful growth made by students who design their own curriculum. These students report that they have improved their skills and strategies in thinking critically and creatively, solving problems, working collaboratively with others, communicating well, writing more effectively, reading more analytically, and conducting research to solve problems. No traditional curricula, delivered as separate subjects, can provide students with the deep, diverse, and meaningful learning experiences that their own curriculum choices can lead to.

It's time that the public understood that no school can provide its students with "enough" curricula for life. It is foolish to believe that what one needs to know can be limited in such a way. Parents, educators, businesspeople, and political leaders should all be astute enough to recognize the fallacy of the arbitrarily established perfect spiral curriculum, accompanied by manufactured time lines for achieving each set of curricular content standards. I, like every other honest adult, can see through my own life experiences that basic traditional curricula did not prepare me well for life beyond the four walls of a school.

Educators have been talking about creating "lifelong learners" for many years. But traditional curricula that are isolated and separately delivered do not engage learners with the principles needed to handle most of life's challenging circumstances. When students engage in curriculum integration, they can begin the process of becoming lifelong learners just when they are cognitively ready to move toward the advanced thinking that accompanies adulthood -- during their middle and high school years. I did not have such an opportunity until I reached adulthood and began studying the world through my own trial-and-error experiences. Why should our children and grandchildren have to wait so long to be prepared for what counts in life? Educators can fix this now. But we must begin by admitting, "It's the curriculum, stupid; there's something wrong with it!"

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  3. Dave F. Brown, "Informal Assessment of Middle-Level Teachers' Perceptions of Prioritized Learning Outcomes," unpublished raw data, West Chester University, 2000-2003.
  4. Carol Smith, conversation on Vermont's learning outcomes, November 2002.
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  6. Marion Brady, "Thinking Big: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Everything," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2004, p. 281.
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15. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.
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19. James A. Beane, *Curriculum Integration: Designing the Core of Democratic Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
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21. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
22. See Dave F. Brown, “Self-Directed Learning in an Eighth-Grade Classroom,” *Educational Leadership*, September 2002, pp. 54-58.
23. Gert Nesin, Barbara Brodhagen, and Carol Smith, “Middle Grades Curriculum: Planning with Students -- Part 1,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Middle School Association, Minneapolis, November 2005. Similar sessions have been held at each NMSA meeting for the past decade.
24. A number of schools throughout the U.S. that have been engaged in curriculum integration with middle-schoolers for several years are noted in Knowles and Brown, p. 94.
25. David A. Hamburg, “The Opportunities of Early Adolescence,” *Teachers College Record*, vol. 93, 1993, pp. 466-71.
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