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THE PURSUIT OF CURRICULUM

Schooling and the Public Interest

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Preface

Words that set out as descriptions of fairly specific things or events often become universally applicable. Today, practically any situation involving some kind of learning is liable to be referred to as an instance of *curriculum*. In this book, I want to return the word to a more limited meaning: I shall be talking about the curriculum of schooling—the program or programs offered to students who enter the elementary school aged five or six, and leave secondary school somewhere between the ages of 16 and 18. What is the curriculum? What should students be learning? Who should decide what it is good to be learning? How are such decisions to be made? My concern is not so much to give specific answers to questions of this kind as to discuss what kinds of considerations should lie behind the answers that we reach. Insofar as I offer conclusions, they are personal ones. But as part of the exercise of presenting my own viewpoint, I also provide a general guide to ways in which such questions are approached.

The personal perspective which I describe has developed through conversations with others, some mainly or entirely through the printed word, some mainly through the spoken word. My "pursuit of curriculum" over the last 25 years has been stimulated, shaped, and enlivened by predecessors, colleagues, and students from many countries. In this respect, I acknowledge special debts to Ian Westbury, editor of the series in which this book appears, to Joseph Schwab, to Maurice Holt, to John Meyer, and to Janek Wankowski.

Swells Hill, Gloucestershire, April, 1992.

Prologue

The Pursuit of Curriculum

Most of us can remember a key phrase or utterance which, at some point, helped us to crystallize a half-formed thought. For me, one such occasion occurred during a reading of James March's (1972) paper "Model bias in social action," where he wrote:

> Justice is an ideal rather than a state of existence: we do not achieve it; we pursue it. (p. 414)

The metaphor of "pursuit" seemed, in a number of ways, to be a compelling analogy for my own engagement with the curriculum of schooling. I could not believe that, by taking any amount of thought, it would be possible to devise techniques or procedures to deliver an "ideal" curriculum; and this, it must be remembered, was at a time when speakers at curriculum conferences, who had imbibed too much philosophical theory, or overindulged in planning by objectives, frequently announced the discovery of just such a holy grail. On the other hand, neither was I comfortable with the notion that, in the end, the making and teaching of curriculum was simply an exercise in pragmatism—what I will later be referring to as *operationalism*: just figuring out "what works." But the idea of pursuit seemed to encompass both ends of the problem. To pursue is to be active, to engage with the world, to face its obstacles and opportunities, to recognize those occasions when pragmatism is called for, or when ideals must not be sacrificed. Pursuit always has to be inventive. It takes us into new territory. The solution that worked last time may not be effective this time round. But, and it is an

important but, pursuit has an end in view, and it is the desirability of the end in view that determines the quality of the actions we take in its name. We know that in the world we inhabit, justice cannot be a state of affairs; but without the guidance of ideals of justice, no courts, trials, investigations, or legal enactments will serve the good of society. Similarly, we are never going to realize perfect curricula, but schools, teaching, assessments, and mandates will only serve the good of society insofar as they are guided by curricular ideals.

My main aim in this book is to persuade my readers to look upon curriculum as a pursuit: both to see how the analogy can help us to understand the nature of curriculum problems and discover ways of solving them, and to recognize that this pursuit is something that they themselves could and should be engaged in. Some will take it up as professionals—teachers, planners, researchers—but many, I hope, will have other backgrounds and will engage with curriculum questions as concerned citizens. As many current national reports and initiatives are constantly reminding us, curriculum, like justice, is a possession of society as a whole. If its pursuit is to be successful, it has to be the work of the many, not the few.

The pursuit of curriculum, in its most mundane sense of something that occupies our time and attention, is taken up by people of many different preferences and dispositions. The profusion of claims and counterclaims about what curriculum is, and how we should think about it, can be confusing to anyone who listens to political debate, or goes to the literature for enlightenment. On the other hand, examination of these claims can help us draw up a map of how curriculum is, in fact, thought about. This is the task I embark on in the first part of this book. The positions we adopt on curriculum questions are expressions of a social philosophy. How can social philosophies be categorized? What differentiates them? What implications do they have for the kinds of social action in which we should be engaging? Only as we begin to perceive some kind of map of curriculum thinking can we actively choose what stance we ourselves would like to adopt, or trace out the implications of the attitudes or values that we have already formed. Only as we learn to appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of other possible positions can we judge the relative strengths and weaknesses of our own position.

Having sketched a map of the various perspectives that we commonly find adopted in response to curricular issues, I then turn in the second part of the book to an elaboration of the perspective that my own pursuit of curriculum has shaped. This I describe as *deliberative*. As the label suggests, it owes a great deal to Joseph

Schwab's advocacy of deliberation as "the method of the practical" that should be the basis for the resolution of curriculum problems (in Westbury & Wilkof, 1978). My own pursuit has, however, taken me over some different territory from his and led me to some different emphases. In particular, I am more concerned here with curriculum as a public institution, and how that aspect of it is to be accommodated within a deliberative perspective, and relatively less concerned with curriculum as practice and its realization within traditions of liberal education. My most important concern, however, is with the question of how these twin aspects of curriculum—institution and practice—can be reconciled. This dilemma, I believe, is at the root of much of the current concern about curriculum which has been evidenced in the United States by reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (1983) and *America 2000* (1991) and in Great Britain by developments surrounding legislation for the National Curriculum.

These are thoughts that I pursue in my epilogue, where I trace out the implications of my deliberative perspective for our understanding of current controversies over what should be taught in schools.