

The case for an enhanced parental role in curriculum choice within the public school

Mary Anne Raywid

I find it a little strange to be defending the position that parents should have an enlarged role in determining the curriculum — since by training and disposition, I tend also to see curriculum as very definitely a professional question, drawing on considerable expertise. But for me, curriculum decisions should tap three sources — and I have little doubt that of the three, parents are the most consistently overlooked, and the group which over the years has lost most. Thus it is that I can without hesitation represent the position that parental input into curricular decisions ought to be enlarged.

I shall try to show why, and I want to begin by identifying the groups I feel ought somehow to be represented in curriculum decisions. And if it seems strange to talk in such terms — to identify groups or interests for representation, rather than kinds of knowledge to be presented — it is because the question of *who* is to decide is currently the curriculum issue of greatest moment. A recent study reconfirmed the findings that we are more concerned about who will be deciding than in what decisions will emerge.¹ Thus, it would appear that the question assigned this panel — whether professional or community standard should prevail — is very much in tune with the times.

Three Central Interest Groups

It seems clear to me that ideally, three groups or interests should be reflected in all broad or significant curricular decisions: the teacher, the knowledge expert, and the parent.² For me, it is

obvious that the teacher must be represented in such decisions — because he or she ought to be the source best equipped to decide what is more educationally sound for a particular individual or group at a particular time. But the knowledge expert needs also to be involved, because few teachers have the time to become the kind of scholars optimally equipped to judge what knowledge is most important. (And even if they can acquire such expertise there is no way they can maintain it while fulfilling all of their other obligations.) Finally, the parent needs to be involved, because curricular decisions influence the kinds of people children will become — and the right of the parent to some kind of input on such a question ought to be clear.

Patterns of the Past

There are distinct patterns in the relative influence of each of these groups in the educational decision-making of the past. The opening decades of the century swung the balance in the direction of the teacher, as influenced especially by the ideas of John Dewey who argued that it was *only* the classroom teacher who could know just what content would prove maximally beneficial for a particular learner at a given point in his or her development. (In Dewey's view, learning comes from a particular kind of interaction between learner and content. There can be good and poor fits between the two — and only someone who knows both learner and content is in a position to make sure it is the former.) Educational fashion began to shift quite markedly in the 50's

however, to favor curricula developed by experts — by curriculum specialists as educational experts, or researchers in the various disciplines as knowledge experts, or both. For a variety of reasons, this tendency became even more pronounced as the 60's progressed. The last four or five years have begun to mark a redress, however, with a move away from expert-devised curricula. Such a shift might be predicted from the disclosure earlier cited, to the effect that today's burning curricular question is not *what*, but *who*. In recent years, both teachers and parents have sought a greater share of the action.

The press for an increased teacher role in curricular decisions has been manifest in a number of ways. Recent studies have confirmed beyond much doubt that the educational programs most likely to endure are those which allow for adaptation and refashioning by teachers, in contrast to calling for sheer adoption.³ Without allowance for teacher input a new program is likely to prove unsuccessful or even, as John Goodlad suggested, simply to disappear 'behind the classroom door.'⁴ This sort of awareness, plus teacher assertiveness in contract negotiations, has increased the teacher's share in curricular decisions vis-a-vis the expert's share.

For Parents: A Poverty of Choice

But perhaps you will have noticed that little has been said about the *parental* share. That is because, as the century wore on, educational decisions have increasingly become a matter of which *professional* would prevail, teacher or knowledge expert and the parent dropped out of the picture entirely. The local control and voucher experiments, and slightly later the development of the alternative schools movement, have been virtually the only forms in which parental curricular prerogatives could be asserted. Now I am aware, of course, that some curricular choices are otherwise available to youngsters and/or their

parents. The most familiar example is the choice in high school of a college prep-academic program, or a business or vocational program. Not atypically however, that may be almost the sole choice — with curricular sequences fully established within each program, once one has chosen to enter. Our local junior high, for example, has presented us with exactly two other choices in three years which foreign language, and typing or no typing. Everything else is decided elsewhere — and those who question such an arrangement, or any of the decisions it yields, are told in effect that these are professional decisions because they are technical in nature. Whether an English class is going to stress poetry or punctuation, or whether eighth-grade social studies will be history or civics or interdisciplinary, or whether a science class will emphasize data for rote ingestion or demand concepts for application, are all treated as professional issues with no place for parental input or preference.

Why not? it might be asked. Why *should* parents retain a sizeable share in educational decision-making? For me, three broad sorts of considerations render such retention essential. First is the assumption that *no* public institution within a democracy ought to be run exclusively by its staff. Any institution or arrangement established to some public purpose — such as a hospital or a prison or a system of traffic lights or a park — ought to be subject to some effective control by the public. The experts employed in these enterprises are not entitled to a free rein — e.g., to turn hospitals into laboratories that jeopardize patients, or prisons into factories articulated largely by a profit motive, or traffic lights into surrealist displays rather than safety provisions, or parks into showplaces that cannot be used.

Schools are institutions that the public at large has established and which it supports quite directly. At least to some extent the relationship ought to represent *agency* — where schools act

for, and in the name of, the public which has established them. But that does not very often seem to be the case. The public's control is presumably exercised through elected school boards. Yet, "most board members do not view their role as representing, or speaking for, 'the public'; rather, they view it as speaking for the administration to 'the public.'" In consequence, conclude three analysts of school governance, "whatever parents believe about it, control has indeed been lost . . ."⁵

A second factor recommending the entitlement of parents to a substantial voice in curricular decisions is that schools are not a take-it-or-leave-it proposition. They are institutions which a child is required by law to attend for eight to twelve crucial years, from early childhood to early adulthood. Short of rarely bestowed court exemptions, neither the child nor his parents has the right to keep him out of school. Under these circumstances, it would seem that the parent should be able to feel confident about certain minimal conditions. At the very least he or she seems entitled to feel assured that the child will not be systematically estranged from, or rendered alien to, the values that articulate the home.

Now, I am aware that this is very difficult terrain. I certainly would not want to have to testify to the values of all homes. But as with so many of life's choices, the real struggle is not between good and bad — but between two goods which, upon careful scrutiny *both* come with evil attached. The obvious sort of challenge to what I am suggesting is, of course, whether I would want to extend the "no systematic estrangement" assurance to the racist, the religious fundamentalist, the rightwing extremist. The less frequently acknowledged challenge to the *other* side, however — to the imposed curriculum — is how extensively such schooling differs from Plato's totalitarian scheme or any other willing to see the school lead a child away from the undesired orientation of its parents. (One might reply, as in fact

we often do, that the solution then is to allow schools only to act on those values that we are *sure* as a people that we want to embrace. But such a stance in turn gives rise to at least these two important challenges: (1) Is the majority tyranny thus condoned truly compatible with the minority rights of democratic living? (2) Are the values schools reflect in fact restricted to those that are widely or generally espoused?)

Value Dimensions of Education

A third factor makes it particularly difficult for schools to offer parents the sort of bottom line assurance I am proposing — that there will be no systematic estrangement of their children, or that the values taught will not, as a package serve to deny all the core values of the home. And it is this third factor which for me finally makes a parental voice in educational decision-making imperative. It is that education is shot through with values. If it were *not* — if it were possible to separate the value dimensions of education from the technical dimensions — then the issue which concerns us would be far simpler to resolve. It might be reasonably and democratically said under such circumstances that parents (perhaps with other members of the community in some combination) should make the value decisions, and the professionals could then make the technical decisions. But the difficulty is that such separations can be made only in *discussions* about education; they simply cannot be drawn or maintained in real classrooms. Values don't attach exclusively to educational aims, as many have assumed — but to curriculum and teaching methods, and administrative arrangement and practices as well. We cannot extract the value decisions from the rest within a school. There is likely to be a value dimension to virtually any decision, large or small, made in or for a classroom. Anyone who doubts this would do well to walk into an elementary school classroom and simply look

around. One I visited last week had the following signs on bulletin boards, blackboards, etc:

**"Good Food for Good Health:
Eat Three Balanced Meals Every Day"**

"Pick Up, Put Away" (instructions)

"Helping Hands" (a list matching youngsters to tasks)

"Help Others" (a poster)

"Have a Happy Day" (teacher message on blackboard — with smiley face)

"Hey, Look What I Did" (a list of youngsters and achievements of various sorts)

"Brain Teasers" (an assortment of puzzles)

"Pronounce Your S's Correctly"

Each of these admonitions, instructions, arrangements has a major value component—even *clusters* of such components — which if disposable at all, could only be accomplished at the ridiculous cost of rendering school and learning totally irrelevant to life and living. (Each entry on that success list cited above reflects and imparts value judgments on what is desirable. — It certainly contained no items such as "John Smith beat up Marty Brown" or "Evelyn Jones skipped school Tuesday." Moreover, the very existence of such a list reflects some values about sharing the word of our successes, and receiving social rewards for them.) The situation is not different at higher educational levels, although it takes more subtle forms there: the values are simply inextricable from the rest of the educational package.

The controversial MACOS program (Man: A Course of Study) stands as an excellent illustration of the prominence of values within education. Its material certainly are not preachy or moralistic, yet its value load is considerable. And the controversy that has surrounded the program has centered almost exclusively on this value dimension, not on its pedagogical attributes. From a technical educational standpoint the program

is absolutely outstanding. I know of none I think is as good! But here are some of the value-laden messages the MACOS reflects and projects:

Human beings are understandable by means of an approach similar to that for understanding other parts of nature.

Certain tendencies — e.g., aggression — are visible in both animals and human beings.

Human behavior is to a considerable extent environmentally determined.

We ought to learn to view human behavior as the product of circumstances, rather than moralistically or judgmentally.

Children ought to learn to use ethnographic methods in observing human behavior.

Children ought to understand the difficult moral dilemmas of caring for the very young and the very old.

Cross-cultural and cross-species understanding is desirable.

Concepts are more important than facts.

What is distinct about the human species is desirably studied in 5th or 6th grade.

It is not my purpose to take issue with any of these. In fact, I happen to be committed to every single one of them. I cite them to show two things, however: First, the intertwining of belief and preference. Fact and value are by no means as separable as it has long been fashionable to assert that they are — which is one of the reasons why we could not eliminate value from classrooms even if we wanted to. And secondly, this list of values embedded in the MACOS program is by no means accepted by everyone in our society. It is patent, of course, that religious fundamentalists would reject a number of the associated values. But so would some who simply incline to more traditional religions. Moreover, there are a great many educators who would take sharp issue

with the last three judgments on the MACOS list above — claiming, for instance, that a cross-cultural approach is a less desirable route to understanding than a direct one, or that facts are more important than concepts, or that this content is better studied somewhat later. And if so, it is hard to defend the view that such matters are technical in the sense that professional training makes one conclusion clearly preferable. But if it doesn't — if several *different* conclusions on how best to educate are compatible with professional training — then why shouldn't parents have a voice in choosing among them?

This would suggest parental input with respect to educational methods and activities. The case for parental input with respect to content seems even more obvious: If we ourselves are truly committed to freedom of belief for adults — and if we can concede that it is neither absurd nor evil to want to see the world *wise* than in terms of the first four MACOS messages listed above — then why shouldn't parents have some genuine choices in this regard?

The Need for an Enlarged Parental Role

I believe that the case for an expanded parental share in educational decisions is an extremely powerful one. There are certainly ideal limits to the *extent* of such input, just as there are logical limits that ought to be imposed on its *range*. But such questions must await another time and place. Space limitations also prevent a detailed look at the proper medium or arrangements for expressing and implementing parental input, but several things seem important in devising them.

First, I want to make it clear that even though I have spoken of "a voice" and of "shares" and "inputs" and "balances"

among three groups (teachers, knowledge experts, parents), I think it would be a disaster to try to quantify curricular decisions, vote on them, or pursue any of the other procedures which such numerical figures of speech might bring to mind.

Secondly, I don't think for a minute that we could *have* schools if every single decision had to be submitted for parental approval! So the means for expressing parental choice would in my judgment have to be *other* than by having several constituencies deliberate item after item. But I see no reason why we in education cannot articulate different curricular orientations, and different perspectives about how schools should operate, and let parents choose among them. And it should be clear that not all parents must choose the same way — because there is no reason why all schools must be the same.

Americans are a diverse people — a fact which we celebrate. Why not let that diversity be reflected, along with our commitment to freedom of thought, within the schools which our children must by law attend?

FOOTNOTES

1. Jon Schaffarizick and Gary Sykes. *NIE's Role in Curriculum Development: Findings, Policy Options, and Recommendations* (Washington: National Institute of Education, February 8, 1977).
2. Some, of course, would say that we cannot assume student interests will be adequately reflected by these three groups — and accordingly that older students at least ought to constitute a separate, fourth, group for representation. I have excluded them here in order to focus on the panel's assignment to point up school vs. home interests. A fuller discussion would surely have to treat the matter.
3. See the eight-volume study *Federal Programs Supporting Educational Change*, especially volume VII, *Implementing and Sustaining Innovations* by Paul Berman and Milbrey W. McLaughlin. (Santa Monica: Rand, May, 1978).
4. See John I. Goodlad et al., *Behind the Classroom Door* (Worthington, Ohio: Charles A. Jones, 1970).
5. L. Harmon Zeigler, Harvey J. Tucker, and L. A. Wilson, "How School Control Was Wrested from the People," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 58: 536, 534; March, 1977.