

Requirements for a Curriculum: A discussion paper

Tasmania. Education Department, 1980

Overview of the document

32 page discussion paper that is the final report of the Core Curriculum Study Group. The Core Curriculum Study Group was established following the 1977 report, Secondary Education in Tasmania, which recommended that secondary education include a core of six broad areas of study. This plain language discussion paper addresses the basic requirements of the curriculum from a teacher's perspective.

Keywords

Core curriculum; curriculum from the teachers' perspective; essential learnings, basic competencies, capabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

Why was this paper written?

- Notes that the paper arose as a result of recommendations of the 1977 report, Secondary Education in Tasmania and that it represents the final report of the Core Curriculum Study Group, established by the Curriculum Branch following recommendations that a "core curriculum including six areas of activity" be developed for all students. (p. 1)

What's in it for teachers?

- Notes that this paper looks at curriculum from the teacher's point of view and concentrates on "what will be in teachers' minds as they are planning a school program", be that in a kindergarten or community college. (p. 1)
- Notes that the paper might be used as a basis for discussion among teachers, or by individual teachers in planning their own programs.
- Suggests that this paper might be useful also in engaging in discussion with those outside schools, and that "it might have a special value just now, when many people in the community are quick to criticise what they think is happening in schools". Notes that although criticism varies, there is widespread "belief that schools are not doing what they should". (p. 2)
- Notes that "the ideas contained in the paper are familiar" (p. 2) and that many teachers would say they are already putting these ideas into practice.
- Notes that "The paper discusses curriculum without going into detail about what to teach and how to teach it" and that while this may disappoint some, "the writers believe firmly that decisions about details of the curriculum are best made by schools and their communities". (p. 2)

Is 'core curriculum' a useful phrase?

- Notes that the study group began by considering some of the views already held about "core curriculum" in Tasmania" and examined ideas of a core curriculum in: the "old" Schools Board of Tasmania Certificate & its basic subjects; Back to Basics movements; Secondary Education in Tasmania (1977); Tasmanian Education Next Decade (TEND) (1978); Report of the School Certificate Review Committee of the Board of Tasmania (1980); and Core Curriculum for Australian Schools (1980).
- Highlights that the idea of core curriculum is interpreted in many different ways.
- Notes that "The paper itself illustrates how hard it is to settle on a permanent 'core'". (p. 3)
- Notes different meanings of the idea of 'core' such as activities the curriculum should provide, the things children should learn, the purposes that teachers might share, and asks "Which one of them, if any, can be called the 'core'?" (pp. 3-4).

Does the curriculum need a core?

- Notes that: "The study group saw quite early that none of the potential 'cores' mentioned above could be discussed without frequent reference to the others." (p. 4)
- Notes that the study group found that "what they had to say about curriculum was common sense, and that it could be put in plain words". (p. 4)

Four major requirements

- Identifies the four major requirements of curriculum as that it must:
 - "spring from a concern for children;
 - help each child learn, and go on learning, as much as he can about himself, the world and the people in it;
 - contain a strong thread of usefulness; and
 - highlight some purposes to which all teachers can subscribe." (p. 4)
- Argues that "If the curriculum fails to meet any of these requirements, it is inadequate." (p. 4)

A CONCERN FOR CHILDREN

Children have the final say about what they learn

- Notes that in deciding to write about curriculum from the teacher's point of view, the study group "was aware of the pitfalls of writing about the curriculum as if children do not exist". (p. 5)
- States that whatever teachers think they might be teaching, "Children learn only what they choose to learn and let the rest go by. By choosing what to learn and what to ignore, each child thus creates his own curriculum." (p. 5)
- States that "Children will choose to learn whatever catches their interests, excites their curiosity, arouses their feelings, saves them from hunger or other threats, sets them thinking, strikes a familiar chord, or shines with what they see to be good." (p. 5)
- Notes that if a teacher accepts that children create their own curriculum, the teacher also accepts that the children then will shape the curriculum decisions of the teacher, because the teacher will choose curriculum appropriate for the learning needs of the children.

Learning is affected by relationships between people

- Asserts the importance of good relationships in the classroom and notes that good relationships are also important to children's confidence and self-esteem.
- Highlights that many children still enter and leave school with low self regard and argues that teachers should ensure they at least do not lower children's self-esteem.
- Notes that the greatest influence on a child, however, is from his parents and that while teachers "cannot do much to affect what parents make a child think about himself", they "can influence what parents make a child feel about school". (p. 6)
- Encourages the development of good relationships between home and school.

Children differ

- Discusses individual difference and notes that children will vary from day to day in terms of levels of confidence.

Learning depends on adequate physical development

- Notes that the study group debated whether physical development should be regarded a fifth requirement of the curriculum. It was eventually decided that physical development was "of a different order from the others" but that it is important and should be given special attention.
- Argues that adequate provision for the physical development of children goes beyond physical education classes and that schools should also be concerned with the overall health of students.
- Advocates monitoring and improving of health and fitness and that schools should see factors that affect strength and agility as important including adequate food and sleep, testing of sight and hearing and development of coordination.
- Recognises that schools cannot do all that is needed for children's health but must rely on the cooperation of parents and community health and welfare agencies.

Learning can give pleasure

- Argues that curriculum should encourage enjoyment of learning.

TO LEARN AND GO ON LEARNING

- States that "The curriculum must help each child learn as much as he can about himself, the world, and the people in it. It must therefore offer him a range of things to

do and a variety of ways of doing them. It should not allow him to specialise until he has first widened his experience”. (p. 9)

- Notes that this section of the paper is organised around a series of reflective questions for teachers followed by discussion of the points raised.

A range of things to do

- Asks the question: “Why offer a range of things to do?” and notes that:
 - Curriculum must reflect variety of expanding knowledges and their interrelationship.
 - Curriculum must take into account different needs of students.
 - Curriculum must help people to deal with an increasing complex society.
 - Intellectual growth is linked with physical, social and emotional growth and the curriculum must help children grow in all areas. (p. 9)
- Asks the question: “Who selects the range of things to do?” and:
 - Contrasts “child-centred” and “subject-centred” approaches and suggests that “teachers make a mistake when they commit themselves totally to one of these beliefs or the other”. (p. 10)
 - Notes that “Educational bandwagons come and go” and that teachers should not feel guilty for not doing what is currently fashionable. (p. 10)
 - Argues the best approach is any one that is used with sensitivity and skill.
- Asks the question: “How can the range be organised for teaching?” and:
 - Discusses different ways that school programs can be organised: by discipline, combinations of disciplines and clusters of topics or activities.
 - Discusses the main points of division between teachers who want to retain a subject focused approach and those who favour an ‘activities’ approach.
 - Notes that what matters is not so much whether teachers take a subject/syllabus or a broader approach but “what matters is that they are forever looking for ways to improve learning.” (pp. 11-12)
- Asks the question: “Do some school subjects help children’s learning more than others do?” and:
 - Overviews arguments for discipline based approaches as basis for broader learning.
 - Overviews alternative approaches to studying a theme and encountering history, mathematics etc. as part of an integrated approach.
 - Concludes that “whether children study the disciplines formally or otherwise, the study group thinks that they should encounter the ideas contained within them, and that these ideas should be presented so that they are both interesting and coherent.” (p. 12)
- Asks the question: “What about certificates?” and notes that: “It is generally accepted that the main function of schools is to help children learn. Secondary school, however, for a variety of reasons, also award certificates. Some teachers think that helping children grow calls for one kind of teaching, and giving them certificates calls for another. If this is so, then teachers must ask themselves how they can do both at once.” (p. 12)
- Asks the question: “What about the sequence of learning?” and argues that new learning must relate to previous learning and discusses sequencing in relation to what is developmentally appropriate. (p. 13)
- Asks the question: “What about skills and drills?” and notes that:
 - “There is not much point in teaching children specific skills and information – like multiplication tables or special rules and conventions – just in case they

might need them later on. Teachers should introduce such things to children at the time that they are most likely to need them, and will therefore want to learn them.” (p. 13)

- Deciding on when the time is right, is not easy and will vary for different children.

A variety of ways to do things

- Asks the question: “In what ways can children learn?” and notes that:
 - The way children learn is as much a part of the curriculum as what they learn.
 - So that children have a chance to learn in a variety of ways, teachers should ask the following in relation to their programs:
 - Do learning activities range from the informal and spontaneous to the formal and planned?
 - Are children given the chance to learn first hand as well as second hand?
 - Are children put in contact with things at times simply so they know such things exist and at other times to gain deeper understanding?
 - Are children given the opportunity to work alone as well as in groups?
 - Are children and teachers given the chance to think of activities and plan the way they should be carried out?
 - Do children have the opportunity to discuss openly the values of others?
 - Does the curriculum deal with ideas that fit comfortably with those the child already has as well as others that challenge or contradict?
 - Are children given the chance to communicate with a variety of audiences using many media? (pp. 14-15)
- Asks the question “How many children should learn together?” and notes that it is important for teachers to consider a variety of ways to group the children in the class – so that learning can take place in groups that range from small numbers to the whole of the class. (p. 15)
- Asks the question: “Are there better ways of teaching?” and notes that:
 - There is not enough evidence for the study group to assert that there is a ‘best’ or ‘right’ way of teaching.
 - Research is continuing to uncover more information about how children learn
 - “The understanding and artistry of the skilful teacher will remain a school’s most precious resource.” (p. 15)

Fitting the range and variety to each child

- Asks the question: “How much time should the school allow for each subject and activity?” and notes that:
 - Time allotments for subjects are rarely questioned and that this is an area which could benefit from some change.
 - Schools should complement and build on what children learn elsewhere. (p. 16)
- Asks the question: “How does the school’s allotment of time match the child’s needs?” and discusses:
 - The importance of balancing breadth and depth.
 - Other issues around time, notably how relatively little of actual teaching time may be used productively by the student and how timetables rarely take account of the time each child needs to learn something. (pp. 16-17)

- Asks the question: “What should the child learn about himself?” and states that:
 - “The curriculum should help a child discover how he acts in different situations, and how he can harness his abilities and get things done. It should also help him discover what kind of person he is, and what he does well.” (p. 17)
 - “But why should the curriculum help a child make discoveries about himself? It is not just so that he can fit into his niche in the adult world. It is also to help him realise that he can make that world better for others and for himself, and to give him the confidence to try.” (p. 17)
- Asks the question: “What about talented children?” and argues that children with special talents should be given the opportunity to develop those talents but this should not happen at the exclusion of everything else. (p. 18)
- Asks the question: “What about children who are struggling?” and notes that:
 - Teachers should not assume that students who are struggling lack ability.
 - Helping children overcome impediments sometimes calls for schools to do more than just teach and schools should explore what else they can do to help students.
 - Additional measures taken “are likely to be most effective when teachers build on what such children can do, and go on from there”. (p. 19)

A THREAD OF USEFULNESS

- Notes that the writers had trouble agreeing on what this section of the paper should be called and that options canvassed included: “essential learnings”, “the core”, “basic competencies”, “enabling capabilities” but that these were rejected because “they were looking for something less pretentious”. (p. 20)
- Discusses the purposes of schooling as the adequate preparation for adult life.
- Argues that “the best way to make sure that children will have a chance to lead satisfying lives as adults is to allow them a full childhood” and that children need time to grow up and teachers should protect them from being pushed into things they are not ready for. (p. 20)
- Canvasses different ideas about what is “useful” and rejects the idea that the focus of schools should be vocational training.
- Nevertheless, sets out a number of “useful” things that children should learn and states that: “When children leave school, they should be able to:
 - obtain information
 - speak effectively with another person
 - communicate well enough in writing to be able to write letters and fill in forms
 - behave appropriately in everyday social situations
 - give a good account of themselves in an interview
 - perform arithmetic calculations of the kind used in everyday life
 - distinguish between right and wrong, and choose what is right
 - manage the general running and maintenance of a household
 - find their way about
 - interpret advertisements and propaganda
 - exercise their rights and responsibilities as citizens
 - show tolerance when it is appropriate
 - make good use of their leisure time.” (pp. 22-23)
- Notes that this list contains general abilities and skills but does not include everything that children should learn and that decisions about specific things that should be

learned should be made in the school, with the assistance of children and members of the community.

- Notes that the list contains no mention of the level of performance that children should be expected to attain and that “The best the study group could do here was to conclude, rather imprecisely, that the vast majority of children, say 95 per cent, can probably learn to do the things listed here and others like them, at least at a simple level.” (p. 23)

SOME COMMON PURPOSES

Finding some common purposes

- Notes that while much of this paper has discussed differences, teachers also need to keep in mind common purposes.
- Adopts the three common purposes advanced in TEND report: Communicating, Thinking and Valuing.
- Notes that the Committee tried to define these terms, but failed, so instead it provides a list of examples (for example under communicating is ‘writing a letter’, ‘listening to someone reading a poem’ etc). Also provides the following descriptions:
 - “Communicating can take place in many ways, ranging from the formal and planned, to the informal and spontaneous.” (p. 26)
 - “Thinking refers to all those intellectual activities by which people make sense of their experiences, past, present and future.” (p. 27)
 - “Valuing implies accepting or rejecting something when the accepting or the rejecting is influenced by feeling as well as by thought.” (p. 28)

Putting common purposes to work

- Suggests that words like ‘communicating’, ‘thinking’ and ‘valuing’ can help teachers remind themselves of some important things that children can learn while they are studying any subject matter. (p. 29)

CONCLUSION

- Concludes with the following paragraph: “A curriculum that meets the requirements put forward in this paper will give children access to the knowledge, arts, skills, customs and values that make up their culture. But this paper will probably disappoint some people in at least one way. Although in the beginning it seemed to promise that it would clarify people’s thinking about the ‘core’ curriculum, it has not even spelled out what ‘core’ is. In fact, the conclusion of the study group was that the term ‘core curriculum’ is not helpful, and that discussions of the curriculum might be carried on better without it. It might seem that the study group has written as if all children live in a bright, cosy world rather than one which contains want, intolerance, dishonesty, inequality and inhumanity. But schools cannot hide these things from children. Even if they could, to do so would be to deny everything this paper says. Children need to know about such things – even meet them face to face – and use their powers to fight them, just as they need to know about the world’s brighter qualities.” (p. 32)