Decision-points in curriculum work

Gerald M. Mager

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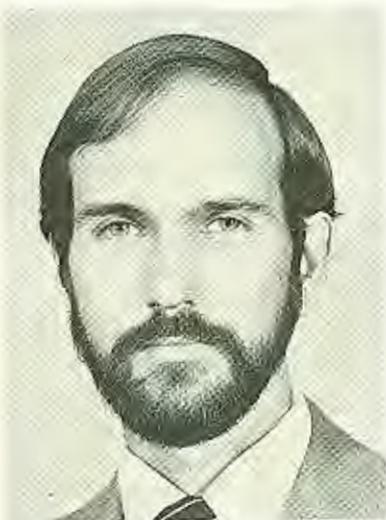
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The field of curriculum has captured the attention of many educators, both those who are chiefly practitioners and those who are chiefly theorists. The field has harnessed their energies, intellects, and imaginations in the hope of producing some incremental advance in the larger context called education.

Theories have been espoused, practices have gained favor, principles have been enumerated, and models have been implemented: all under the guise of curriculum development, reform, theorizing, and practice. What has resulted, through a century or more of earnest efforts, is a field rich in ideas and wealthy in practices, but unquestionably poor in organization. Out of this lack of order has come seemingly conflicting practices and virulent disagreement among theorists. Consequently, the field of curriculum has been unable to contribute steadily to the conduct of education.

In the final paper of the 1947 Conference on Curriculum Theory Virgil Herrick and Ralph Tyler (1950 p. 123) called for a clearer understanding of the how's and what's of curriculum theorizing:

> ... the problem would be clarified and the issues would be kept clear if the writers on the various topics of curriculum development would make sure that the reader is always told what decisions are being made and exactly how these decisions are being reached. It would be especially helpful if the points where value judgments operate were honestly recognized and critically discussed in the writings on curriculum theory. The second suggestion is that some critical study be made of the role of values in curriculum investigation and that the implications of this study be shown for the development of curriculum theory and practice.

Nearly three decades later, such understandings as these are still not forthcoming in the theory, and practitioners yet gloss over important value judgments. The purpose of this essay, then, is to suggest one framework for organizing and viewing the field of curriculum, in the broader context of education. The framework is intended to make more obvious the decision points of curriculum work and at the same time to put into perspective the theories and practices now abundant in the field. It is in effect a meta-theory; that is, a theory of theories. If it is useful for educators interested in curriculum work, it will have served a purpose. If it brings to the field a sense of unity, or inspires another more helpful perspective, it will have served equally as well.

Education as a social action

Philip Kotler, in a 1972 essay, identifies what he has termed "The Elements of Social Action." These five elements, **cause, agency, target, channel,** and **strategy,** are ways of viewing and organizing the parts that seem to be common to all social action. Kotler (Zaltman, Kotler and Kaufman, 1972, p. 174) defines social action as "the undertaking of collective action to mitigate or resolve a social problem." Though the use of the term "social problem" seems to narrow the scope of what Kotler identifies as social action, clearly education falls within the broader understanding of what he intends. Kotler explains more fully:

> ... large scale social action, as a species of social behavior is a relatively recent phenomena. Today, large numbers of people join or support causes

aimed at improving some aspect of society. They raise money for medical causes, give time to the needy, protest social injustice, and even challenge the established social order. Socially concerned people are organized, aided and abetted by a growing number of professional social actionists—lawyers, ministers, social workers, community organizers, social-planners, teachers, radicals. (1972, p. 174)

Making the assumption that education is indeed a form of social action and interpreting it through Kotler's five elements establishes a framework through which the field of curriculum may be viewed in its greater context. Thus, a perspective is brought to education, curriculum theory, and practice that highlights the critical decision points facing educators.

In this essay, each of the five elements will be studied separately, as it applies to the social action called education. Though there may appear to emerge a chronology or sequence in which the elements "naturally" occur, closer examination will reveal that such an ordering is not real in education or curriculum. Further, it must be recognized that each of these elements has a vertical dimension ranging from the concrete to the abstract. This introduces yet another complication into the problem at hand for an idea presented simultaneously on more than one level may appear to be two or more ideas, thus leading to confusion and even argument.

Education's causes

Kotler (1972, p. 174) defines **cause** as "a social objective or undertaking that change agents believe will provide some answer to a social problem." He distinguishes three types of causes including helping causes, protest (or reform) causes, and revolutionary causes. For which of these three types of causes or goals education is undertaken is not immediately clear.

Much of the theory and many of the practices endemic to education would seem to espouse helping causes: some educators seek to abrogate poverty by providing the poor with skills which will enable them to find employment; a particular teacher sets as her goal that a particular student learn how to more productively work in groups. In both cases the goals are of a helping nature. But examples of reform and revolutionary goals may also be identified. An English teacher has his students read and discuss **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** to interest them in the plight of peoples subject to institutional care. At one time, school systems across the nation taught about the "evils of communism" to build in the students strong defenses against any conspiratorial influences, and fostered student governments to give students practice in functioning as citizens in a democracy: these actions endorse an anti-revolutionary goal.

Each of these kinds of causes represents a different perspective on the nature and purpose of education in American society. Equally important, in the words of

(Figure 1)
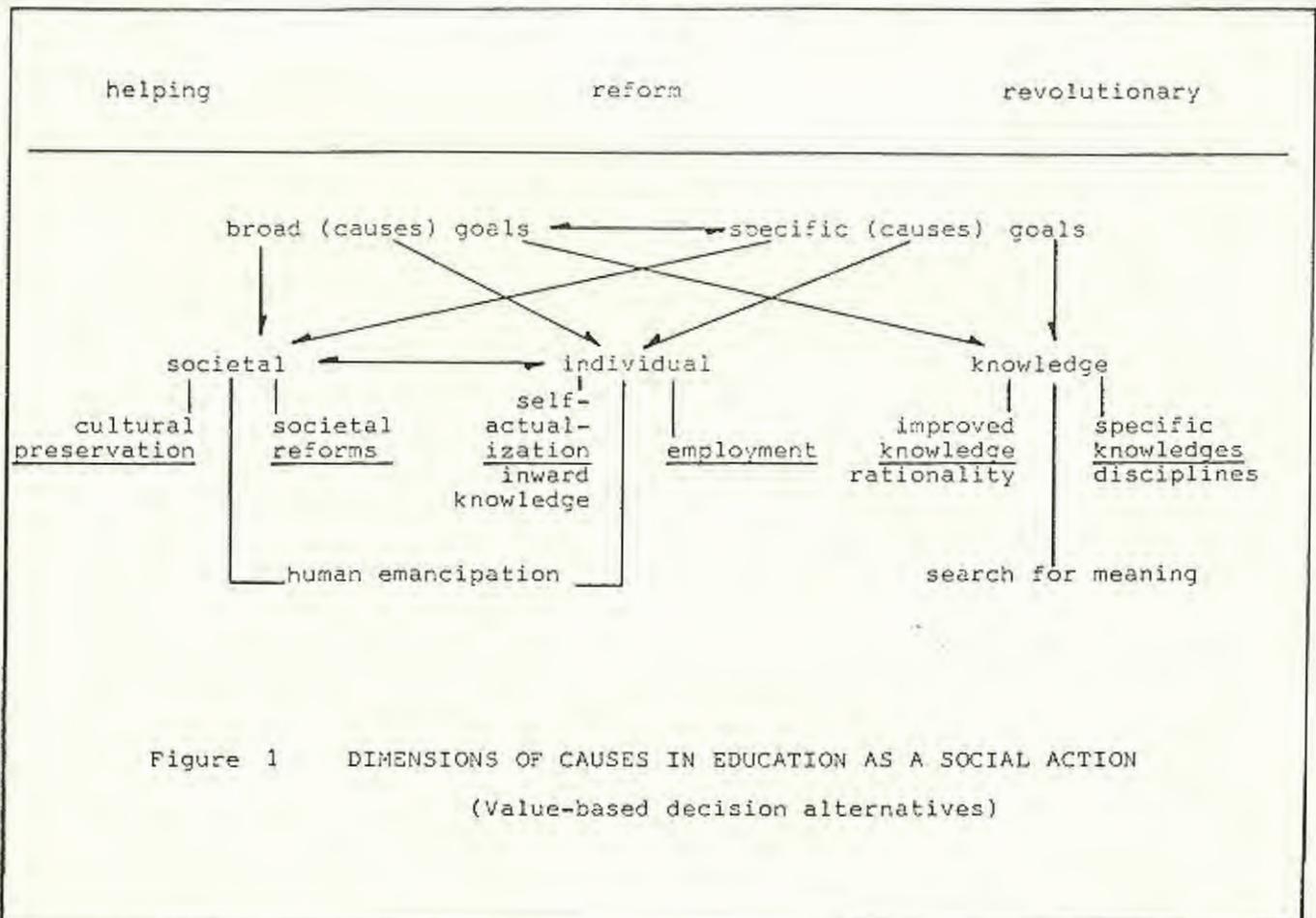
Figure 1   DIMENSIONS OF CAUSES IN EDUCATION AS A SOCIAL ACTION

(Value-based decision alternatives)

Herrick and Tyler, these represent decision points based on value judgments—decisions which ought to be recognized as such. Glossing over such decisions, or failing to realize that value-based decisions are being made confounds curriculum work. Theorists oppose each other on priorities of education, unable to see that their differences are grounded in essentially different causes for education; practitioners argue methods with the same myopia.

There are yet other dimensions on which various causes or goals of education may differ. Figure 1 represents some of these dimensions graphically. Causes for education which are found in both theory and practice, therefore, fall on a continuum from broad to specific. Herrick and Tyler (1950, pp. 121-2) identify three foci for these goals: society, the individual, and knowledge. Goals in any of these three arenas may, again, range from broad to specific.

William T. Harris, educational reformer in the last century, called education a process "by which the individual is elevated into a species." (Pinar, 1975, p. 20) In doing so, he declares a value position which lies along the continuum of goals somewhat closer to the societal focus than that of the individual.

Saylor and Alexander (1974, p. 18) state that the central goal of schooling "and therefore of the curriculum and its planning, is the most complete development educationally feasible and socially acceptable of the self-directing, continuing learner." Their emphasis, therefore, lies chiefly with the individual.

Other theorists have emphasized the role of the disciplines; common practice in many schools has done the same. Further, those who favor the core curriculum look at knowledge somewhat differently. Gordon Vars (1969, p. 5) writing of core curriculum, lists two long-range goals of education in the United States: "to prepare citizens who can function effectively in a democratic society, and . . . to help each person become a fully functioning individual." Vars' broadly stated, bi-polar goals underscore the emphasis on functional knowledge. Even so-called goal-free or open-ended curricula implicity pursue identifiable goals.

What is important here is that each dimension of causes in education represents points at which value-based decisions are made. To choose one cause is to not choose another. To act as if one cause, or set of causes, is preeminent, is to de-emphasize another. Curricular decisions, of course, must be made. But these decisions should be made with full knowledge of the greater context of alternatives. The inevitable differences between and among theorists or practitioners should be seen as grounded in value-based decisions. The goal-setting aspect of curriculum work can then be held in perspective.

Agents in Education and Schooling
The social action element called **agency** is defined as "an organization whose primary mission is to advance a social cause." (Kotler, 1972, p. 174) Many agencies in American society can and do act as educational agents.

Vars, having identified the two long-range goals of education, states that within society, several institutions share responsibility for pursuing the goals. Some of these agencies include the schools, industry and business, churches, government, and the family. There are also

agents such as students, teachers, administrators, parents, community groups, and specialists involved. Increasingly shared responsibility among all of these agencies and agents is being recognized.

Lawrence Cremin (1976, p. 58) forcefully supports this point in arguing for an "ecological approach" to education: "The fact is that the public is educated by many institutions, some of them private and some of them public, and that public schools are only one among several important public institutions that educate the public." Thus, a value question is once again put before educators and more particularly curriculum workers: To what extent and for what causes should they direct their efforts? Theorists and practitioners face this issue when confronted with proposals on such issues as sex education, moral education, and even career education. In all cases, the decision as to who or which institution is to act as an educational agent, given a cause, is once again a value-based matter that should be recognized as such.

Once a decision has been made that the schools and school personnel will promote a cause, yet another decision must be made. Kotler divides change agents into leaders and supporters. In curriculum work, who shall act as leader and who shall support the effort? Regarding the possible choices for these roles, there is some disagreement in both theory and practice.

In 1961, William Alexander reported that elementary and secondary principals ranked the textbook as the resource most influencing the instructional program (Passow, 1962, p. 15). More recent surveys repeat this finding. Clearly textbook writers and publishers continue to function as "leaders" in curriculum development, but there are other approaches. Some of these cast local educators in the role of leader, as do Frymier and Hawn (1970, p. 3). Saylor and Alexander (1974, p. 42+), however, place the student in the leadership position, and the teacher, resource specialist, and community educator in supportive roles. Finally, in many areas, the parents are increasingly taking the initiative in curriculum change by defining, extending, and sometimes restricting the goals, materials and processes at work in the schools.

Thus, several dimensions of decision-making exist in any consideration of curriculum work. In curriculum development, theorizing and practice, these dimensions represent points at which decisions are made, thoughtfully or unthinkingly. They are the points at which disagreements can occur and differences can be resolved. And they represent points at which, for whatever reasons, value choices are made.

Channels: The Educational Event
In discussing **channels** as an element in education as social action, Kotler (1972, p. 174) defines these as "ways in which influence and response can be transmitted between change agents and change targets." As applied to education, channels are then the points at which the social action occurs: the educational event. One part of that event is the curriculum. Figure 2 places curriculum into an interactive relationship with three other parts of the educational event. School organization, the learning process, and the instructional process have all received wide attention in the literature. Each contains a complex of decisions for the change agent to consider.

In the consideration of curriculum as part of the educational event, and a part of the channels by which the agent works toward a cause, there are two central value

questions which must be faced: How should the curriculum be developed, and what should the curriculum contain? Value-based answers to both these questions are found throughout the literature. Both theory and practice are replete with the efforts of curriculum workers to resolve these complex issues.

In an attempt to clarify the first, James Macdonald has suggested that there have been three distinguishable approaches to how curriculum is developed, i.e., to curriculum theory (Pinar, 1975, pp. 5-6). The first approach is followed by those predominantly concerned with developing curricular theory explicitly to guide practice, and thus curriculum workers following this approach might be called "utilitarians." A second approach is based on the idea that activity involving curriculum can be studied in terms of variables and the relationships among them. This "scientific" approach to curriculum theorizing has been less widely used. Individuals thinking and working in this tradition might be called "scientists." The third approach identified by Macdonald is characterized by Pinar as a basic reconceptualization of the field of curriculum theory. Macdonald described these efforts in this way:

> . . . look upon the task of theorizing as a creative intellectual task which . . . should be neither used as a basis for prescription or as an empirically testable set of principles and relationships. The purpose . . . is to develop and criticize conceptual schema in the hope that new ways of talking about curriculum, which may in the future be far more fruitful than present orientations, will be forthcoming. (Pinar, 1975, p. 6)

These three theory realms seem to encompass the vast majority of curriculum theory efforts. In addition to providing answers to the question of how curriculum should be developed, they provide helpful guides in making order out of a wide range of practical curriculum development operations as well.

The other persistant value question, What should the curriculum contain? is not so easily addressed. The value preferences undergirding curriculum decisions are very complex and often difficult to discern. Just a sampling of the alternatives evidences this point.

John Dewey (1938, 1973, p. 89) theorized that education (and hence, the curriculum) should be based on experience—the actual life experience of the individual student. In contrast, much of the science curriculum work of the 1960's took as its starting point the nature of the discipline: its structure and processes. A very different curriculum resulted. Arthur Lewis and Alice Miel present a classification of conceptions of the curriculum which has two major categories: curriculum as something intended, and curriculum as something actualized. Examples within each range from the course of study in the first category to the learner's actual experience in the second (Saylor and Alexander, 1974, p. 3). Curriculum designs that would fall into one of these categories would, once again, reflect the values of the curriculum worker.

From a very different perspective, George Beauchamp calls for the curriculum to be a written document, thus rejecting the notion that the curriculum should be considered to contain the educational experiences of a youth at school (Saylor and Alexander, 1974, p. 4). B.O. Smith questioned whether the curriculum should reflect the wisdom of the past, or make a leap into

the unknown future world (Herrick and Tyler, 1950, pp. 7-11).

Obviously then, what the curriculum should be like is a question with a multitude of answers. What is important in this context, however, is the awareness of the breadth and complexity of the decisions made in curriculum work. This is significant because, just as with the elements of cause and agent, the element of channels represent a focus of value-based decisions.

Targets of Education

Kotler (1972, p. 174) defines the **target** as "individuals, groups, or institutions designated as the targets of change efforts." There are essentially four levels of both intermediate and ultimate targets: individuals, groups or classes, institutions, and society as a whole.

The literature provides many examples of each type of target group. Target can be closely related to cause, for many goals of education are explicit in naming those toward whom they are directed. One example might be a vocational training curriculum which has as its target individuals who do not possess the skills necessary to get the job they desire. Other groups or classes in society have likewise been the targets of curricula: the "disadvantaged" child, the "exceptional" child, the emerging adolescent, the college bound, the retired person, the person retraining for a new job. Curricula have also targeted institutions in society. Governmental bodies, industries, businesses, and religious bodies have been the targets of educational social action. Choosing among these various targets is definitely a value-based decision. Kotler also describes targets as being either intermediate or ultimate. Reflection on this distinction raises yet another set of value questions. For example, is the individual, or is the society as a whole the ultimate target of educational causes? This question, as the others raised in this essay, is not easily answered.

Clearly, a question of ethics is raised in "targeting" any individual or group for a cause. This is not to say that education and curriculum work should cease. It is to say, however, that the planned workings of one group of people on another should raise serious concern about the nature of those workings and their eventual results. This concern leads directly to a discussion of strategy, the final element of social action.

Strategy: A Critical Decision

The discussion of the element **strategy** was intentionally held until last as its importance comes from the context of the elements discussed earlier. Kotler (1972, p. 174) defines strategy as "the basic mode of influence adopted by the change agent to affect the change target." He continues with a definition and description of three major types of strategies (Kotler, 1972, pp. 183-4):

> A power strategy is one that attempts to produce behavioral compliance or cooperation in the change target through the use of agent-controlled sanctions.

> A persuasion strategy is one that attempts to induce the desired behavior in the change target through identifying the social object with the change agent's existing beliefs or values.

> A reeducative strategy is one that attempts to induce the desired behavior in the change target through the internalization of new beliefs or values.

Given these various types of strategy, there are several types of questions which must be considered by educators: Descriptive, what strategy is most often employed? Valuative, what strategy is preferable? And ethical, what strategy is conscionable?

Obviously the questions of strategy cut across all other elements of education as social action, and it is exactly on this key element that recent critics of American education have had a considerable impact. Holt, Kozol, and Illich view the compulsory attendance of American schools, coupled with the problems of educational bureaucracies and the sometimes stultifying effects of classroom life, as the chief arguments against the system as it now exists. In light of the compulsory attendance laws alone, a re-examination of causes, agents, channels, and targets is inescapable. Do educators-agents have the right to work their goals-causes through a curriculum-channel on a student-target group when that group is subject to the compulsory attendance-power strategy? And if educators do indeed have that right, then what principles must govern their social action?

Of course, education may not use the strategy of power as extensively as such an example would imply, but the divisions are rarely clear. Some school activities are clearly based on persuasion, others on the educative strategy. Curricular patterns draw on all three strategies, and it may not be possible to cipher completely which activities depend on which strategies. Yet, it is important to remember that agents, whether they be school personnel or others, make many value-based decisions in the process of the social action called education. Many of those decision-points have been described in the discussions of each of the elements. Now those points take an added significance in consideration of strategy—the basic mode of influence—adopted in education.

Elements of Education as Social Action
An Application and Summary

Each of the five elements of social action has been defined and discussed as they might apply to the social action, education. Though it was necessary to discuss them one at a time, in the realities of education any one or several may form the starting point for curriculum work. Lawrence Cremin's description of the curriculum work of Jerrold Zacharias, et al, on the Physical Sciences Study Committee (PSSC) is a case in point (Pinar, 1975, pp. 26-8). As described by Cremin, Zacharias progressed through a 9-point process:

1. power strategy: a course is to be taught;
2. channel: the course is in the discipline of physics;
3. agent: scholars and expert teachers as leaders;
4. agent: supportive staffs and technical assistance;
5. channel: content, through development of syllabi and materials containing concepts and methods of physics;
6. persuasive strategy: materials made as engaging and efficient as possible;
7. target: students (non-specified);
8. channel: testing of materials in instructional situations;
9. agent: classroom teachers trained to use the materials.

Clearly there were some alternatives at various points in this curriculum development process which were either not chosen or not considered. Yet, this example can still illustrate how order can be made out of the process using Kotler's analysis of social action. Other curriculum work—theory and practice—could be similarly analyzed and studied. The literature gives examples of the many patterns followed in practice or supported in theory, one not necessarily better than the next. Each pattern, however represents a series of decision-points. Herrick and Tyler called for a clear statement of what decisions are being made and how they are made, and a better understanding of the role of values and ethics in curriculum work. A pattern which does not face the issues—address the value-based and ethical questions—in each of the elements has left a gap in its conception and development.

David Jenkins and Marten Shipman (1976, p. 6) define curriculum as

> . . . the formulation and implementation of an educational proposal, to be taught and learned within a school or other institution and for which that institution accepts responsibility at three levels, its rationale, its actual implementation, and its effects.

Curriculum workers own a large share of that responsibility; both theorists and practitioners must insure that their work is complete and thoughtfully done.

In applying Kotler's elements to the processes of education, those responsible for the conduct of schooling will better understand the origin of differences and the grounds upon which agreement can flourish. The critical decisions of curriculum work are made public; discussions of alternatives is invited. The field of curriculum itself may become a more consistent contributor to the conduct of education.

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