

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

In this section some of the general issues and problems arising from the foregoing survey of projects and innovations are identified. These can be considered under Information and Channels of Communication, Decentralization and Devolution, Relevance, Optional Subjects, Work Study, Citizenship and Equality of Opportunity.

Information and Channels of Communication

Central authorities are well aware that in order to control the process of curriculum development accurate information and channels of communication are essential. In general, statistical information is growing but the survey reveals some areas where important information may not be readily available to those working in the curriculum process in ministries of education. Gaps in information are both quantitative and qualitative.

Gaps in quantitative information are in areas such as:

Teachers' levels of education and qualification.

Percentage of the appropriate age group in full-time formal secondary education and the extent of the participation in non-formal secondary education.

Numbers of drop-outs and repeaters.

Participation rates of girls.

Proportion of secondary school leavers continuing to further education of different types.

Variations from average staff-student ratios by regions, types of school, etc.

Types of non-formal educational provision offered for out-of-school youth in the secondary school age group.

Separate information with respect to all the above for lower and upper secondary schooling.

Areas where there appear to be a lack of qualitative information are:

The types of educational work in which other ministries and agencies are involved.

The ways in which the curriculum of teacher education is adapting to meet the demands of curriculum change at school level.

Local involvement in curriculum change by:

Teachers, individually or as members of teams in schools

Teachers' groups and centres

Teachers' subject associations

Materials production centres

Employers

Members of the community in general

Members of the community with specialist knowledge and skills

Parents

Co-operation between primary and lower secondary schools

Co-operation between secondary schools and further education institutions

Co-operation between schools and non-formal educational agencies

Naturally, quantitative data are somewhat easier to assemble. Nevertheless, most countries pay tribute to what they perceive as the vital contribution of teachers and others at the local level to curriculum change. Centralized curriculum control and direction is in danger of operating in a vacuum if it lacks a data base from which to guide local endeavours.

To gather data at the local level, channels of communication have to be established, institutionalized and used fully. Many countries recognize this and some have already gone a long way towards establishing them. This may be easier, of course, in smaller countries than in larger ones. But as we have seen, the 1970's has been a decade when efforts have been geared mainly to the establishment and consolidation of curriculum development machinery at the centre. In order to ensure maximum returns on this effort the 1980's, perhaps, should be a decade when strategies are devised and put into effect for opening up communication between central agencies and local personnel.

Decentralization and Devolution

On the evidence of the survey it is not clear whether a majority of countries consider decentralization of curriculum development to be desirable. There is a large gap between a determination to involve local personnel in the process of curriculum implementation and a desire to devolve responsibility to the local level for the complete process, from planning and design to implementation and evaluation.

As noted earlier (p.13), a number of countries are reviewing where they stand on this issue. Within the Commonwealth there are differing traditions and contexts exemplifying different degrees and modes of control and participation. In the majority of countries it is likely that a high measure of central control will remain. The problem seems to be, rather, how central authorities can provide opportunities and incentives for local initiative and commitment while controlling the process in favour of those projects which prove most worthwhile with respect to nationally-determined criteria. The twin drives are for efficiency and accountability, harnessing local enthusiasm and relevance to central guidance and control.

A number of considerations are relevant to the formulation of policy on this issue. Sensible decisions will be made in the light of a number of crucial contextual variables. In particular, the following questions must be raised:

How far are central authorities and personnel prepared to share a measure of power and authority with local ones?

To what extent are there traditions of local participation in schooling?

Do local institutions exist which are willing and able to adapt to new responsibilities or must they be created? School managers and boards, local education officers and teachers' colleges are particularly important.

Do the teachers in a locality have sufficient levels of education, training and experience to undertake responsibilities for the various stages of the curriculum development process?

If not, do training opportunities exist? Are they up-to-date?

Are the teachers able to undertake a major and continuing commitment to extra tasks? What is the relationship of teacher supply to student enrolment? What is the effective staff-student ratio?

Are the teachers posted to a particular locality long enough to develop a knowledge of it and a commitment to it?

Are sufficient support staff for teachers available? Examples of these are supervisors, inspectors, curriculum development officers and advisers who are locally based; para-professionals whose work enables teachers to undertake new duties for curriculum development.

Furthermore, decisions in regard to these questions have to be taken within various contexts. Some of these are:

The size of the country and the efficiency of its communication network.

The size and scope of the local administrative unit.

The channels of accountability, including very importantly, methods of financing. Evaluation procedures are also indispensable.

The specific stages of the curriculum development process to be decentralized or devolved. As we have seen, teacher participation is a major mode of local involvement but their role is limited in many cases to syllabus adoption and materials production.

The formal channels of communication to be used or developed to ensure a two-way flow of information without excessive red tape.

Relevance

A major argument for some measure of decentralization or devolution is, of course, to increase the relevance of school-based learning to the locality. Our review of the changes in the objectives and content of school subjects reveals that relevance is a major concern here too - relevance to the individual's interests and needs and, even more prominently, to national needs.

Academic-Vocational Subjects

The distinction between "learning for its own sake" and learning for instrumental, often vocational, purposes is fast disappearing in practice. Several factors are responsible for this:

The trend towards a common core curriculum for all students, irrespective of their ability, background, expectations for the future and the type of school they attend.

The trend towards subject integration which combines traditionally distinct "academic" disciplines or concepts, in ways which are intended to lend them local and contemporary relevance.

The trend towards the identification of a basic core of "subjects" which demand, in their revised forms, the application of "intellectual" skills to practical issues. One important point here is the full recognition that basic numeracy and literacy are pre-eminently vocational - pre-requisites for full citizenship and economic participation just as much as for entry to higher education.

The trend towards a rich programme of optional subjects wherever practicable and especially at the upper secondary level. The range of options spans "academic", aesthetic and "practical" interests.

Problems with Relevance

While the concern for relevance provides a unifying theme in curriculum change, certain issues seem problematic in almost all countries. These are:

Standards

How can relevance be combined with good standards? There seems to be an anxiety here that these aims are incompatible. Two points are important. One is that the logical sequence of a subject does not necessarily have to be followed in teaching the subject. Unless the needs and interests of the learner and the pace at which he can learn are taken into account in the teaching of any syllabus, true understanding, as opposed to meaningless memorization of content, cannot occur. To equate "ground covered" with "standards achieved" is a false equation. The other is that the criteria by which standards are judged must themselves be relevant to the context. Standards do not exist in a vacuum, unrelated to a context. Examinations are just one way of measuring standards in international, regional,

national and local contexts. Other criteria may exist and should be used in addition.

Core Concepts

Related to the issue of standards is the problem of identifying what are the basic minimum core concepts and skills which are essential to the integrity of any subject? This is even more problematic where integrated studies are involved unless these are conceived as contributing towards learning skills rather than covering subject matter from each discipline.

Teaching Methods

Most countries in principle favour "student-centred", discovery, enquiry, problem-solving techniques which tend to presume a large degree of individualized learning. This in turn demands an appropriate cultural context, suitably trained teachers and the ample human and material resource base which many countries lack. Thus teachers may struggle to implement curricula devised with "modern" teaching methods in mind even when conditions favour teacher-centred methods and a didactic approach. The knowledge base is very weak here and research is needed to decide which teaching methods are appropriate in local contexts.

A similar issue is how best to cater for the different abilities and special needs of students. Streaming may be deterministic while self-selection may tend to depress students' capacity to widen their interests and extend their abilities. Mixed-ability teaching is widely practised but methods of enabling all students, including the gifted and the slow learner, to reach their full potential, have not yet been found. Discussion of teaching methods is crucially involved with how to make learning relevant to the student and how to improve standards.

Optional Subjects

While there is consensus that the provision of options is important there are practical problems in providing them. Major ones are the shortages of specialist teachers, teaching materials and equipment, especially in science and technology, and the dangers of over-loading the timetable. Devices for overcoming these problems are urgently needed.

A related problem is how to combine student choice with manpower needs. This is, of course, a perennial issue. A number of countries are experimenting with an element of compulsion in the study of nationally significant subjects such as science, technology, agriculture, civics and language. The expectation is that students will "discover" an interest and aptitude in subjects which they consider difficult or of low status. Another strategy is to "integrate" aspects of such subjects into broader programmes. Additionally, "flexibility" and "adaptability" can be made important objectives of any work-oriented programme.

Work Study

There is a consensus on the vital importance of work-study arrangements but very few practical experiments and even fewer wholesale success stories are reported. This may be one issue which needs a high degree of local involvement if it is to be resolved. Significantly, the principle seems very difficult to put into practice whatever the resource-base and context.

Citizenship

The degree to which countries explicitly write a commitment to developing student patriotism and citizenship into their curricula varies. Much depends on national style and the urgency of problems of national unity and integration. One aspect on which there is a dearth of information is the extent of student involvement in community projects and the effect on these of students' knowledge, attitudes, orientation and skills. Another important issue in most countries is to resolve the tension between the aims of civics curricula to nurture in students habits of loyalty and respect at the same time as developing in them the constructive, enquiring and critical frames of mind necessary if they are to make their contribution as involved and responsible adults.

Equality of Opportunity

Many of the issues discussed above relate also to equality of opportunity as a national aim, but two additional points may be emphasized here.

Differentiated Curricula

How far should particular groups of students be provided with different curricula in the interest of providing for their special needs and how far should this process go before it becomes discriminatory? This question is a perennial one which is raised with respect to rural and urban schools, students at the top and bottom of the ability range, ethnic and other cultural minorities and the handicapped.

Predictably, as secondary school enrolments rise in countries which are extending basic education, the number of special categories of students will rise. So this issue will not go away. Indeed, it may even spill over more than it does at present, to include larger numbers of secondary school age pupils who are catered for in non-formal institutions or by distance teaching.

The trend is towards a policy of common core with optional elements to cater for special needs. A great deal of skill and sensitivity is needed to devise curriculum and syllabus guidelines which are sufficiently prescriptive and sufficiently flexible to encourage both national standards and local adaptation. The key is to alter the balance from "different but equal" to "equal but different".

Examinations

Examinations must promote efficiency and be relevant but they also have great influence on opportunities. The issues which emerge from the survey indicate how significant examinations policies are to the process of curriculum reform. The major questions are these:

How can the structure of examinations be loosened in order to enable every student to gain some recognition of his achievements even if he has to leave school before the end of his basic education?

What other methods of assessment of performance and potential are available apart from, or in addition to, formal examinations?

How can the modes of examination be developed which encourage curriculum innovation in the interests of genuine education and to the discouragement of cramming and rote-learning?

How can methods of testing (essays, objective tests, etc.) strike a balance which gives encouragement to many different aptitudes and abilities of students?

If teacher records, student profiles and locally administered tests are used, how can national standards be maintained and consistency between schools be achieved?

Does the trend towards a compulsory core of subjects mean a stronger trend towards examination of compulsory core subjects? And if so, must students pass in all of them in order to gain an award?

Must students pass or fail (in the interests of standards) or may their achievements be recorded on a graded scale (in the interests of individual differences in motivation and ability)?

Can levels of passing and failing be divorced from considerations of the levels of job-opportunities in the economy, in the interests of justice to the students?

How can teachers best be trained to devise and administer tests with imagination, versatility and fairness? How can they learn to use tests and examinations not only to test the achievements and diagnose the learning problems of their students but also to evaluate the curriculum and their own teaching?