Towards a Coherent Curriculum

Introduction: What Is a Coherent Curriculum?

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Also located at:

Imagine that we are faced with a pile jigsaw puzzle pieces and told to put them together. Our first reaction might well be to ask for the picture. When we put together a jigsaw puzzle, we usually have a picture to guide us. None of the pieces means anything taken alone; only when the pieces are put together do they mean something.

In the beginning, we hold each piece up to the picture to see roughly what space to place it in. Later on, after we have put some pieces together, we look for other pieces to attach to a partly completed section. Even as we put these large chunks together, we still look back at the picture to make sure we're on the right track. It is always the picture that guides us. Putting pieces together without the picture can only be a frustrating struggle at best, a way to kill some time.

This jigsaw puzzle metaphor ought to say something to educators. It is, after all, not unlike how young people experience the curriculum in too many schools. They move from one classroom to another, from one time block to another, from one textbook to another, from one teacher to another, confronted by disconnected, fragmented pieces of information or skills. For these young people, the curriculum is a pile of jigsaw puzzle pieces without a picture. They might ask, "What does all of this mean?" or "What is all of this about?" More often, they simply ask, "Why do we have to do this?" We respond, "Because it will be on the test," or "You'll need it next year," or "You'll find out later in life," or, in exasperation, "Because I said so."

Where is the sense in these responses? Could it be that we ourselves cannot summon a reasonable explanation for what we ask young people to do in the curriculum? Is it possible that we ourselves are unclear or do not know, apart from institutional timelines, what it is that the curriculum is all about? Can it be that the jigsaw puzzle metaphor describes not only the experiences of young people in our schools, but also our own confusion about the curriculum?

This yearbook is about the jigsaw puzzle metaphor The title, *Toward a Coherent Curriculum*, invites the professional community and others to imagine ways in which we might overcome the problems that metaphor reveals. But this is no leisurely, armchair exercise. The call for coherence insists that we undertake fundamental rethinking of the curriculum. It asks that we abandon our specialized loyalties to particular parts and reconsider what and whom the curriculum is for. This is quite different from most current efforts toward restructuring that seek simply to align or systematize those parts, to demand uniformity, or to tinker with one or more organizational features of the schools. Nor does it simply seek a peaceful coexistence of what is now fragmented and sometimes contentious. Instead, this search for coherence goes to the very center of school life, to the curriculum that defines and mediates the experiences of young people.

The problem of incoherence in the curriculum has a sense of urgency about it. The stakes are high. Increasingly, our students are questioning the purpose and meaning of what we ask them to do. Their lives in school have been deadened by the litany of disconnected facts and skills they face every day. So too are teachers' lives deadened, not only by the students' constant requests for justification, but by their own questions: "Why am I teaching this?" and "If this makes no sense to me, how can I keep asking students to learn it?"

Surely there is no lack of effort being put into the curriculum these days. Talk has heated up about a national curriculum and tests, and countless committees and subcommittees are at work deciding what young people ought to learn in one subject or another Professional associations of all descriptions are issuing statements trying to put their own stamp on curriculum reform. At least two "umbrella" groups, the Alliance for Curriculum Reform and the Forum on Standards and Learning, are seeking to open dialogue among the fragmented community of professional

associations. And hardly a journal issue passes without some suggestion for a "new" curriculum.

Meanwhile, in schools and districts, from classrooms to grade levels to departments to central offices, local curriculum committees are hard at work on a dazzling array of projects that can hardly be said in one breath: outcome-based education, curriculum alignment, interdisciplinary instruction, integrated curriculum, authentic assessment, whole language, multicultural education, thematic teaching, and on and on. There are always some people who love a task of any kind, who thrive on ambiguity, who are willing to simply move from one idea to another. For them, such a flurry of curriculum activity is a pretty picture.

For many local educators, however, it is not. They wonder—and not without reason what will be next year's topic, or maybe next week's. If they are going to spend time and energy on a project, they want to know that it will make some large and lasting difference, that it is not just a passing fad or some isolated activity that has no connection to a whole. These educators often feel that so many trends are like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle without a picture to guide them. Perhaps this metaphor can help us understand in our own terms how young people experience an incoherent curriculum.

The Meaning of Coherence in the Curriculum

A "coherent" curriculum is one that holds together, that makes sense as a whole; and its parts, whatever they are, are unified and connected by that sense of the whole. The idea of coherence begins with a view of the curriculum as a broadly conceived concept—as *the* curriculum—that is about "something." It is not simply a collection of disparate parts or pieces that accumulate in student experiences and on transcripts. A coherent curriculum has a sense of the forest as well as the trees, a sense of unity and connectedness, of relevance and pertinence. Parts or pieces are connected or integrated in ways that are visible and explicit. There is a sense of a larger, compelling purpose, and actions are tied to that purpose.

The idea of a coherent curriculum is not just another passing fad or this year's "hot topic." It is, in fact, one of the fundamental characteristics of a worthwhile curriculum. Think, for example, about the converse of the preceding definition. An "incoherent" curriculum is one whose parts do not hold together in any way; instead, they are disconnected and fragmented. It lacks a sense of unity, relevance, pertinence, or larger purpose. Actions are simply something people do, not necessarily for any clear or compelling purpose.

Such a stark and negative picture is not meant to imply that the curriculum in our schools is thoroughly incoherent. Rather, it is meant to point out what we want to avoid. At the same time, the negative picture suggests the importance of coherence in the curriculum and the urgency of the work before us. Moving toward a coherent curriculum offers possibilities of unity and connectedness among everyday activities in the school and educational experiences for young people that will make sense in terms of larger purposes.

This kind of coherence will open up possibilities for the integration of educational experiences (Hopkins and others 1937, Dressel 1958). That is, when the curriculum offers a sense of purpose, unity, relevance, and pertinence—when it is coherent—young people are more likely to integrate educational experiences into their schemes of meaning, which in turn broadens and deepens their understanding of themselves and the world. In that sense, we might say that a coherent curriculum is one that offers "unforgettable" experiences to young people. Lacking such coherence, the curriculum is likely to be little more than a smorgasbord of superficial, abstract, irrelevant, and quickly forgotten pieces.

Thus, the search for coherence does not mean simply clarifying purposes in the existing curriculum. Rather, it suggests that creating coherence involves connecting parts or pieces of the curriculum, identifying meaningful contexts for information and skills, and helping young people and adults to make sense of learning experiences. Such conditions, however, are never apart from the politics of curriculum. Moving toward coherence means confronting a variety of views about themes and purposes that might hold the curriculum together, as well as seeking widespread

understanding of what the curriculum is about. We will return to these issues later in considering what is involved in moving toward coherence in the curriculum. For the moment, however, we should realize that thinking about coherence in the curriculum raises several questions: * In what ways is the present curriculum incoherent? * How did it become incoherent? * How might the curriculum be made more coherent? * What might a coherent curriculum look like? * Who should be involved in making a coherent curriculum?

Conditions of Incoherence

Evidence abounds to show that our present curriculum is incoherent. For example, most schools offer a collection of subjects or courses of study that are separate and distinct entities. Their boundaries are virtually etched in stone by schedules, teacher loyalties, and organizational structures like departments, subject area committees, and subject-specific supervisors and chairpersons. The latter, as well as some teachers, define their roles in terms of specialized areas: "I am a language arts (or math, or music, or science, or art, or something else) teacher" or "I like to teach reading more than science."

According to the folklore of education, the problem of incoherence occurs only in middle and high schools. Indeed, these institutions are historical bastions of the separate subject approach, tracked programs, and other instances of fragmentation. Yet elementary schools offer their own version of such problems. After all, the self-contained classrooms in many elementary schools only thinly disguise a day divided into subject or skill time slots, instruction in a long variety of subskills, and specialized instruction in "nonacademic" subjects. And the move toward departmentalization is becoming increasingly popular in the upper elementary grades.

Across all levels of schooling, moreover, any specific or particular concern seems to require a separate program: technical for the supposedly linear and sequential, humanities for the arts, "advisory" for the emotional, academic for college preparation, vocational for work preparation, "exploratory" or "special" for the "nonacademic," and a myriad of thinking, reading, writing, self-esteem, and problem "prevention" programs. When new concerns arise, we simply add new programs with their own scheduling slots, space, specialized teachers, and, often, newly labeled students. In compartmentalizing the curriculum in these ways, we act on our own visions of the presumed fragmentation of knowledge, skill, and human activity.

Young people, too, are disassembled into a collection of disconnected parts. The brain is viewed as having differentiated parts for distinctive functions—one for reasoning, another for feeling, and so on—with relatively little communication among them, but each conveniently matched to a different type of school program. Affective, cognitive, and psychomotor dimensions are acted on in the school as if their differentiation in theoretical discussions were true in real life (Beane 1990).

Furthermore, our views of young people as learners are plagued by a sense that somehow the multidimensional roles in their lives can be differentiated. The well-known Supreme Court reminder that young people do not "leave their rights at the schoolhouse doors" hints at this kind of fragmentation. For example, educators have sought to sharpen their understanding of human growth by assigning "stages of development" to various age groups. While this has supported helpful work in the area of "developmentally appropriate practice," it has also obscured the fact that all young people, regardless of age, live in the larger world. Thus, they experience all of what that means in terms of affluence and poverty, cultural diversity and prejudice, justice and injustice, safety and danger, and so on. In short, their lives are more than just the characteristics associated with some stage of development. The tendency to freeze them in one stage or another not only denies their real lives, but describes only a fragment of young people as whole persons.

Expecting young people to suspend experiences in the larger world contributes to the incoherence that arises from the implication that what happens inside the school has little to do with what happens inside a young person. It is as if there were no out-of-school curriculum from which young people learn about themselves and their world. Worse yet, this perspective implies that the larger world has nothing to offer by way of the "pictures" that show how the pieces of

the curriculum hold together.

But what about young people themselves? How does this look to them? Surely they must imagine that there is a reasonable explanation for the disconnection of school from life and the fragmented division of subjects, programs, skills, and activities into separate courses, periods, modules, time slots, tests, projects, worksheets, and so on. Yet they (and we) are nonplussed by the inadequate explanations we offer. Clearly, young people not only sense the incoherence of the curriculum, but know in some way that the incoherence does not make sense.

Isn't it about time that we recognized (or admitted) that the boundaries and categories that fragment the inner life of the school are socially constructed and largely artificial? They do not spring onto the scene from some mystical force. Academic scholars, for example, define the lines that "separate" disciplines of knowledge to secure space in their world and to ease communication among those with similar interests. As Michael Apple (1979, p. 38) has pointed out, "One major reason that subject-centered curricula dominate most schools, that integrated curricula are found in relatively few schools, is at least partly the result of the place of the school in maximizing the production of high status knowledge." Moreover, those who specialize in one or another particular area produce and promote special skill programs. Prevention programs result from interest groups concerned with their own interpretation of one or another particular personal or social problem. And across all of these, the arguments for space and priority in the curriculum have historically been much more about politics than about the quality of educational experiences for young people (Kliebard 1986, Popkewitz 1987, Goodson 1993).

Moving Toward a Coherent Curriculum

The idea of coherence in the curriculum is both compelling and complex and involves a number of issues: design, content, connections, and meaning. The purpose here is to lay out the grounds for these issues. Subsequent chapters in this book discuss how such issues might be resolved through specific curriculum arrangements. Coherence in the curriculum involves creating and maintaining visible connections between purposes and everyday learning experiences. When adults plan the curriculum, they have to decide not only what its purposes will be, but what kinds of learning experiences will lead toward those purposes. That those plans seem coherent to adults does not necessarily mean that young people will sense the same coherence. For this reason, young people are faced with the challenge of understanding the larger purposes of the curriculum, connecting particular learning experiences to those purposes and, all along the way, learning about the pieces themselves.

For example, we may say that we want our students to have a sense of the world in which they live, so we introduce statistics to help them understand certain patterns in that world. At every moment in our work on statistics, we risk disconnecting that work from the real world or, in other words, making it simply an abstract exercise in mathematics. The continuing challenge here is to persistently maintain the connection between the larger purpose and the specific activity Young people also face the simultaneous challenge of learning about statistics, using that learning to broaden their understanding of the world, and continuously maintaining a sense of the connection between the activity and its purpose. Responding to those three challenges is clearly a crucial aspect of curriculum planning and teaching because it offers the possibility that young people will have a sense of what the curriculum is about as a whole.

Moving toward a coherent curriculum involves creating contexts that organize and connect learning experiences. When we are confronted with a problem or puzzling situation in real life, we hardly stop to think, "Which part is mathematics, which physical education, which science, which thinking, which valuing, and so on?" Rather, we sense the problem or situation and then bring to bear whatever we need to know or do without regard for the source. And, of course, if the problem or situation is compelling enough, we are moved to get needed knowledge or skills that we do not already have. Understood this way, knowledge and skills are organically integrated in real life, while their separation in school programs is an artificial and distracting arrangement. Curriculum talk, therefore, frequently includes references to the curriculum being organized around themes. The use of themes helps both adults and young people to see a context for their learning activities and to sense that those activities have some larger purpose. The repositioning of learning experiences into meaningful contexts is the point of much of the current work on

curriculum organization. That work, of course, has taken many different forms. For instance, intradisciplinary efforts bring together smaller pieces of content or skill that are actually parts of a larger discipline of knowledge but that have been disconnected by overspecialization in the curriculum. Here we might place the struggle to create "social studies" out of history, geography, civics, and other aspects of social living (Saxe 1992), Other intradisciplinary examples are the more recent whole language movement and projects in science and mathematics aimed at reconstituting the larger disciplines. A second example is multidisciplinary or multi-subject arrangements that involve correlations among two or more areas (Jacobs 1989). In this increasingly popular arrangement, teachers select a theme like "Colonial Living" or "Metrics" from the existing curriculum and then ask what various subject areas might contribute to the theme. Or they might arrange the subjects around some appealing or popular topic like "Kites", or "Whales."

A third example is curriculum integration. Here themes are based on real-life personal issues faced by young people or major social problems like "Conflict" or "Environmental Problems." Knowledge and skills are integrated in the context of the theme and drawn from any pertinent source without regard for subject area lines. This approach blurs or dissolves the boundaries between subject areas or disciplines of knowledge.

A fourth form—actually a variation on the third—involves planning an integrated curriculum with a particular group of young people who themselves identify the issues and problem areas that cluster into themes (Beane 1991, 1993; Brodhagen, Weilbacher, and Beane 1992). This approach extends the jigsaw puzzle metaphor by asking, "Whose picture is it?" When we purchase a jigsaw puzzle, we don't just buy any puzzle. We go through the box covers looking for a picture that has meaning to the person who will put the puzzle together, either ourselves or others we know. After all, the work is made more or less enjoyable and compelling by the interest we have in the picture. Although the term curriculum integration is currently used to describe all of these forms of nonseparate subject arrangements, its use with the first two is a relatively recent development. Historically, the term 'integration" has most often been reserved for problem-centered themes that help students integrate educational experiences into their ongoing personal and social lives (Hopkins et al. 1937; Dressel 1958; Beane 1993). In short, "integration" was something that young people did for themselves, rather than a simple correlation of various subjects arranged by adults. For our purposes here, though, it is almost redundant to say that a coherent curriculum involves efforts to move beyond a separate subject-matter or skill-area approach and eventually toward more frequent use of integrated arrangements.

Thinking about a curriculum organized around themes, especially those associated with "integration," immediately raises questions about what happens to the content currently covered in schools and it's presently conceived sequences. Advocates of thematic designs have taken great pains to demonstrate that they are not abandoning valued content but rather asking how it might be repositioned in the context of themes. But it is also possible that some content presently "covered," as well as subject-centered sequences, could be at risk. This is exactly the point partially made by the idea of coherence in the curriculum. That is, we are currently faced with a good deal of school-based content that is so disconnected from meaningful contexts that it defies clear meaning for anyone. In some cases, there appears to be no purpose beyond games of academic "trivial pursuit." The question before us is whether the concept of coherence is so crucial to worthwhile learning that we are willing to seriously reconsider the place of such content in the school.

It is important to note, however, that the development of a thematic curriculum is not simply a methodological challenge of connecting pieces of the curriculum. Such connections will promote coherence only if they enhance the sense of purpose and meaning for young people. Moreover, the matter of whether themes themselves are drawn from topics already found in the subject- centered curriculum, from real-life problems, or from some other source may well influence the degree to which young people find meaning in their learning experiences. And, as we shall see, it also has a great deal to do with the politics of curriculum.

Considering the importance of integration in relation to coherence, moving toward a coherent curriculum must involve more fully exploring how people make sense out of experiences. Students of all ages construct schemes of meaning

about themselves and their world (Caine and Caine 1991). Such schemes are constructed out of experiences and are shaded by the influences of culture. So it is that any particular experience might have a variety of meanings among young people, depending on race, ethnicity, class, gender, geography, age, family patterns, and many other cultural aspects. Such aspects of cultural diversity may also serve as a kind of "glue" for piecing together experiences to create the "pictures" that are schemes of meaning. In short, the continuous interplay between experience and meaning is a crucial dimension of a sense of coherence. Iran-Nejad, McKeachie, and Berliner put it this way: "The more meaningful, the more deeply or elaborately processed, the more situated in context, and the more rooted in cultural, background, metacognitive, and personal knowledge an event is, the more readily it is understood, learned, and remembered" (1990, p. 511).

Understanding this leads us toward two final considerations in creating a coherent curriculum. One is that if the curriculum is to be coherent for young people, it must connect with their present experiences. This means that the themes or ideas that hold the curriculum together must make space for young people to find points of personal engagement. That is, the curriculum must have room for their own questions, concerns, aspirations, and interests. We may construct glamorous and clever curriculum designs with the most fascinating activities we can imagine; but in the end, if we don't allow room for personal connections, our curriculum will remain remote, superfluous, and incoherent.

Second, a coherent curriculum must account for who young people are. The diverse dimensions of culture are not simply abstract categories in schools. In very concrete ways, young people bring the entire range to school. It is unlikely that adults who also present a range of cultural diversity can construct a curriculum that will have the same meaning for all young people. A coherent curriculum recognizes and honors diversity and ambiguity. By definition, then, our search for coherence is not a search for a single, magical curriculum neatly bound in a three-ring binder or attractive textbook. Instead, it is a "messy" exploration of the ways in which diverse people connect, organize, and make sense out of their experiences.

The Politics of Coherence

The discussion to this point has focused on issues such as organization and design that we might say are "internal" to the process of curriculum planning. These are, of course, crucial to the possibility of moving toward a coherent curriculum. However, as noted earlier, these issues are never apart from the politics of curriculum. After all, curriculum planning is something that is done by real people; and the same diversity among them that enriches the range of meanings also involves tensions and disagreements over purposes, organization, and processes in the curriculum.

The search for coherence involves long-standing issues in the politics of curriculum because it must involve decisions about what ideas or themes will hold the curriculum together. The question of what the "glue" is raises questions, such as "*Whose* glue is it?" and "Who decides *what* the glue is?" Classical Humanists typically advocate a curriculum of separate, discrete subjects and mastery of what is contained within them (King and Brownell 1966). Such theory asserts that inherent and "ageless" concepts like truth and beauty (Adler 1982) hold these separate subjects together. Religious fundamentalists speak of coherence in terms of a curriculum that is permeated by sectarian values and interpretations that are always based on their own religious beliefs. Those who want the curriculum tied to economic ends would create coherence by continuously placing learning experiences in the context of utilitarian needs of business and industry. And progressives who are interested in democratic schools often call for a curriculum that is held together by contemporary social issues and the instrumental uses of knowledge and skill to take on those issues. Their claims for coherence are grounded in the real-life sources of those issues, their compelling significance, and the use of those issues as contexts for knowledge and skill.

Equally important as naming such differences is noting that the Conservative Restoration of the 1980s has limited the grounds for curriculum conversation mostly to the claims of Classical Humanists, fundamentalist religious demands, and economic interests and has limited the debate over differences to finding overlaps among those three (Apple 1993). Meanwhile, despite its close match with the conditions of coherence, the progressive view has been virtually

deleted from curriculum conversations. Thus, the politics of curriculum fragmentation complicate the move toward coherence, especially because that move will require us to reclaim a wider range of views and to seek more than the not-so-peaceful co-existence they presently occupy in the curriculum.

The issue of coherence in the curriculum is multilayered in that the curriculum is experienced by many different groups: young people, teachers, administrators, parents, school boards, and the community at large. While absolutely essential, it is not sufficient to raise the issue of coherence only in terms of the perceptions of young people. The central location of the school as a primary social institution means that even though young people are its initial concern, the curriculum ought to have coherent meaning for others as well. Specifically, those most closely involved with the schools—professional educators—ought to be able to explain the curriculum without resorting to slick campaigns, public relations gimmicks, or esoteric language. Of course, this requires that they themselves have some coherent understanding of what the curriculum is about. Furthermore, silencing the voices of those outside the profession, including young people, when discussing the curriculum only detracts from the possibility for widely understood meaning and is just as much at issue here as is coherence within the curriculum itself.

However, as we concern ourselves with a multilayered understanding of how the curriculum is coherent, we must be careful not to confusion. coherence with the more narrow idea of consistency (Buchman and Floden 1992). Much of what has passed for curriculum work in this century has been about the desire for consistency and control. Attempts to align objectives and tests, to mimic work subskills in vocational courses, to identify uniform courses and content, and to design sequential skill "maps" are but a few examples of the obsession with consistency. Moreover, much of the current talk about a national curriculum and tests, as well as that about "tech prep" programs, is but the latest in a long line of such examples. Though the search for coherence does not completely reject the desire for consistency, it has more to do with a sense of wholeness, meaning, and connectedness, while accepting the presence of contradictions, tensions, ambiguity, and diversity.

Distinguishing between coherence and consistency brings us back to the issue of whom the "coherence" is ultimately for. The previous examples of searching for consistency clearly emerge from a perceived need among adults. Consistency of school programs with college expectations, alignment of objectives and tests, and uniform and sequential subject designs have much more to do with the need for institutional order and political slogans than with the quality of learning experiences. Worse yet, it is quite possible to develop highly sophisticated schemes of consistency without creating coherence; we can systematize, align, and sequence all kinds of things without their necessarily making any kind of sense for young people.

Finally, the idea of a coherent curriculum is tied to the long-standing tension between general and specialized education. When we consider what ideas or themes might hold the curriculum together, we confront the question of whether to draw them from common, widely shared concerns or focus on specialized interests or aspirations. Advocates of the separate-subject curriculum, for example, claim that their approach has meaning in relation to the subject specialization found in higher education or academic occupations. Religious fundamentalists may claim meaning for their version of education in relation to their narrow sectarian interests. And young people may insist that nothing has meaning outside of some personal hobby or aspiration. Yet each, in turn, involves increasing specialization that fragments individuals and reduces the curriculum to little more than self-interest.
The idea of coherence, on the other hand, seeks unity and connectedness on all fronts, not only among parts of the curriculum but among those who experience it. The sense of meaning to which coherence refers is, therefore, based on widely shared concerns in the larger society that the schools serve. In other words, particular curriculum arrangements may make sense to young people or one or another special-interest group but may not be sensible in terms of larger educational purposes. It is here, finally, that we may understand that coherence in the curriculum is not simply a methodological issue. It is a philosophical one as well.

The issues raised here are only some of those that are involved in thinking about a coherent curriculum. Yet they illustrate how important and complex such thinking is. And they hint at the politics and tensions that often arise—not

the least of which is resistance from those who have deep loyalties to particular pieces of an incoherent curriculum and who may see the move toward coherence as a threat of territorial invasion.

Leaving these tensions for later "commentaries" in this book, we turn next to descriptions of some of the most widely known ideas and projects aimed at creating and sustaining curriculum coherence. Many readers will find here ideas and examples that are familiar in their own schools. That is fully expected because attempts at curriculum coherence, although not necessarily so named, have been of increasing interest among educators. Thus, these chapters may serve the important purpose of showing how to bring many of those very attempts into a coherent focus. For those who have not yet considered the crucial problem of curriculum incoherence, these chapters will undoubtedly offer a challenging set of ideas to consider.