

Curriculum and the Classroom Teacher

by Christina Dowell

I want to address the issue of curriculum because I believe that an excellent curriculum and excellence in its delivery are critical to an excellent education system. Providing curriculum should be primarily the responsibility of officials at the Ministry and board levels; excellence in delivery should be the responsibility of the teachers.

But our system is not like this at all. For 20 years, the Ministry has downloaded its curriculum responsibilities and forced teachers into a narrower and narrower scope of delivery, based on highly-questionable theories like whole language and child-centred learning and in a manipulative, intimidating and oppressive manner. Questioning, critical thinking and information sharing have been suppressed. The proof is printed in directives and policy statements, articles and lists of references and lists of approved texts in Ministry and board publications, as well as in teacher federations' and professional organizations' publications, workshop and speaker topics for conferences and professional activity days, and in teachers' magazines.

"The Common Curriculum" cannot be seen as a catalyst for needed reforms. The educational philosophy or rationale in the first section repeats, more or less, the same sentiments found in all previous Ministry curricula back to 1955 at least, and in the subject and support documents, in professional booklets and publications, board curricula, policies and mission statements, and in guides to texts and programs. We are surrounded.

Until 1975, Ministry curriculum for primary and junior grades included specific skills for specific grades and, until last year, so did many grade seven and eight subject curricula. I've used them. I can assure you they don't impose the narrow restrictions they are accused of. "The Common Curriculum", like its predecessor, "The Formative Years", will sit on a back shelf behind the teacher's desk because it is unhelpful, cumbersome and unusable. Could you tell me what you were going to do with your brand-new grade five class in all subjects for the rest of the year if I gave you "The Common Curriculum"? Of course not.

The responsibility for providing excellent curricula for the classroom teacher has been downloaded to the board level with the justification that it would create greater freedom for their teachers. There is no procedure or system in place to ensure that boards live up to their curriculum responsibilities. Numerous officials from the Minister's office have told me that they do not review local curricula, nor do they plan to. No one could discuss even the large boards' curriculum in language arts,

most popular in the extensive small-board market. This Ministry is not informed.

Most board curricula, particularly in the area of primary and junior language arts, are almost identical. They are as non-specific in terms of what teachers should teach at given grade levels as "The Common Curriculum". It's extremely difficult to determine skill proficiency expectations. Board curricula from the seventies were very different, although they were becoming cumbersome. They listed specific skills, available texts and programs, gave us general standards and creative ideas. They sat on our desks and we used them in our planning. They weren't perfect, but they were helpful.

If teachers have no old curriculum available, they turn to available texts and programs for help. Most board curricula today do not list the texts and programs. Many classrooms across Ontario do not have any texts, since teachers are being encouraged to abandon them. The justification is freedom from the text for the child, freedom to learn at his own rate in his own special program -- and freedom for the teacher to scrounge for specifics, then plan and write usable classroom curricula, over and above usual planning, then find, write, make and/or buy hands-on materials, and then deliver it up to every child at his individually-assessed level and rate, every day, all day, all year. This logic is not of the real world. For students, learning necessary skills becomes a hit and miss proposition with each new grade.

Most elementary language arts curricula in Ontario declare themselves to be "whole language-based and child-centred". While appearing to provide teachers with new choices about classroom organization and teaching techniques, our ability to teach effectively is being strangled. Ministry and board documents show various suggested floor plans for classroom groups and centres, but not desks in rows. There are countless descriptions of delivery ideas, not one of which is a direct instruction lesson. Whole documents, produced by teachers' associations and educational institutions, are devoted to helping teachers move away from any traditional teaching methods to an entirely child-centred approach. Charts are included at the board level so teachers can assess their personal growth (as teachers) away from direct instruction or whole class instruction, despite its validation in large-scale research.

Wouldn't it be sufficient to encourage teachers to use a variety of techniques and to be as effective as possible? I have asked this question of a great many officials over the years. Sad to say, the more I became a self-motivated, life-long learning, critical problem-solver, the less anyone wanted to talk to me.

(Mrs. Dowell is a classroom teacher in Parry Sound who left teaching in 1981 to raise a family and returned to teaching in 1989, only to find that many changes had come about in the meantime. She has been a vocal advocate for reform and a founding member of OQE. Dowell has expressed her concerns to the Ministry, her board, her teachers' union, and to politicians, with virtually no results. Mrs. Dowell has been assigned to teach full programs for seven different grades over the past five years.)