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EVALUATING CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA

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There are two perspectives against which the exercise implied in the title of this paper may be viewed. One is that of the knowledgeable judge, who has at his disposal all the necessary information and certain generally acceptable criteria on which to base his informed opinion about the status and quality of curriculum development in Asia as a whole.

For the purpose of this paper, however, this approach would be too ambitious and, perhaps, even impossible. The reasons are fairly obvious. The first is that Asia is a very vast region, covering countries which represent a heterogeneity of needs, problems, resource, educational goals and objectives. Curriculum development differs necessarily with respect to timing and pace, its characteristics, its inputs and its outcomes. To attempt its evaluation in a region as large as Asia may lead either to an exercise touching merely upon an irreducible minimum of common elements and factors, or result in an extensive analysis based on a detailed country-by-country study. The first alternative, being a highest common factor approach, may produce data too scanty for valid generalisation for the region as a whole so that the problem continues to beg the question; the second, clearly a least common multiple exercise, requires much more time and scope than the present can afford.

The second reason against the global, "judging approach" is the lack of crucial and consistent information on aspects of curriculum development. True, there are brief descriptions here and there as well as various claims of progress made from time to time. But attempts at eliciting data through questionnaires over a large region suffer from certain inherent weaknesses. One is the time lag between readiness to respond and the time target for information usage and reporting. Information flow is erratic with some countries very much behind others in the supply. Thus when data from the various sources of the region are eventually collated

and assembled, they tend to be outdated owing to the various developments which have further occurred in each country.

There is also the time lag between the input stimuli and the output effects. It is not difficult to evaluate a specific effort in curriculum development, particularly if control devices are available and the effort is a short term one. But curriculum development is not a once-for-all affair. It has continuing effects in the human laboratory of the average school, particularly in the situation where implementation has been extended on a national scale. The controls of the investigator used in the pilot stage no longer obtain in the large-scale implementation stage. Educational research furnishes ample evidence on inconsistency between results of studies purportedly aimed at investigating the same phenomena. The moot question here is, "Can we be sure of the effects?" A positive report on a short-term study of curriculum implementation in selected schools may very well be followed, after a period of years, by evidence which does not corroborate the initial findings. On this account, the questionnaire method has to include provision for a continuing series of data collecting exercises in order that the best approximations to the answer may be found. This means that the global effort at evaluation may become both complicated and cumbersome.

Again, questionnaires do not necessarily elicit the actual facts of a case. There is the "save-face complex" to which Asians are particularly prone. The respondent's perception of expedient and prestige, for example, may colour his answers. Those countries, which have embarked on curriculum development, would prefer to report success. This form of reporting is often the only expedient open to the reporting country or agency under the circumstances obtaining. The across-the-board evaluation in Asia may then carry a rosier picture than the actual facts justify.

The third reason against assuming the global perspective is the difficulty of arriving at criteria which may be applicable to all the countries of the region. The criteria for evaluation should be contextually based in each country. They are closely related to the goals, aims and objectives of curriculum development and depend also on the specific needs of each country.

In the light of the considerations above, it may be wiser to avoid the macro approach, which attempts to view Asia as a whole, and to look at evaluation from the standpoint of each country within Asia. In other

words, each country involved in curriculum development accepts itself the responsibility of evaluation.

It may happen that the implications of the task will turn out to be no different for countries in Asia as for those elsewhere outside the region. Nevertheless, countries of Asia share certain problems not necessarily common in other countries. One is the problem of multilingualism which complicates, not only every educational venture and exercise, but also the attempt to evaluate. It is much more difficult in the multilingual context, for example, to ensure the use of equally valid and reliable instruments across language streams for measuring the effects attendant upon each phase of curriculum development.

Another problem is to be found in the Asian traditional respect for learning. A task, such as evaluation is, which may call into question an on-going process in education, is distasteful. It is difficult enough to bring about change in the content of education. It is much more difficult to explain that change also needs to be corrected.

Yet another problem lies in the Asian character itself – its tendency towards philosophical idealism. As a result, a grand vagueness pervades with respect to the goals and objectives of curriculum development, as happens in other aspects of education. These are couched in such terms and linked to such ideals as to defeat operational definition and evaluation.

Strategies for evaluation should, therefore, take these problems into account. In the multilingual situation, those engaged in evaluation should preferably not comprise separate groups of monolinguals, unless there is attached to each group at least one person who has skill at more than just the one language and is knowledgeable about the common purpose of evaluation as shared with a group of n different tongue. The ideal would be a team of persons, with skill in more than one language, working together with clear communication established on the aims, objectives, strategies, the instruments and their content.

Apropos, the second problem, the title of this paper suggests the answers. The use of the present participle as against the noun directs our attention to the need for evaluation on a continuing basis. It is not possible to have either curriculum change or its evaluation as a one-shot affair. Such an approach automatically seals off any consideration that everything may not be perfect. If curriculum development were regarded as a necessary concomitant of change in other areas of life change in lifestyles, in occupational opportunities, in vocational demands, in social

aspirations, in technological progress, in environmental resources and so on -- and, were, accordingly, handled as a continuing process to be constantly corrected for relevance and direction; it should follow that evaluation would similarly be a sustained effort, in-built into every aspect of development. It becomes, then, the rule rather than the exceptional effort and is more likely to become acceptable. By the term, "continuing" in this reference, is meant an evolving process, not one subject to fits and starts caused by the ad hoc injection of new decisions according as the fancy moves.

What has happened in many countries of Asia yields a picture contrary to what is described as desirable here. Curriculum change there has been and is, but on what basis? Frequently it is introduced on no other basis than the simple faith that by changing the curriculum the schools will change and the products of the schools will also change. So the rush to change has not been made with any careful planning. Sometimes, it is mere scissors and paste work. Perhaps this part of the curriculum is unnecessary; cut it out and put in something which is more contemporary, such as modern mathematics, for example. In the effort to make the great leap forward, many a country has found that the attempt does not work. Why, armed with all the concepts of modern mathematics, are school leavers so inept at simple tasks of calculation? In one country in Asia, I came across children without exercise books, desks or chairs, working on set theory on the mud floors of the school huts. The children were mouthing so-called mathematical sentences and terms like some mumbo-jumbo. Most of the teachers had no more than a primary schooling: the best of them were indeed a page or two ahead of their pupils; others were as unaware of the concepts they taught as were their children.

This was a country far ahead in curriculum development, judging by the materials which were produced for my enlightenment general science, veterinary science, health science, modern mathematics, and the like all theoretically sound and produced by teams of expert advisers. But, apart from the elite children in a certain school staffed by foreigners, the average child could not have benefited very much from the prodigious effort of curriculum change. What was he to do with his pure science and modern mathematics when he went home to his isolated hamlet to rear pigs?

Evaluating curriculum development has to begin at the beginning in the setting of goals, in the assessment of the factors which condition change,

in the determination of what should go into the curriculum and what should not, in the consideration of relevance to particular groups and their needs, in the appreciation of limiting conditions with respect to resource inputs, in the assessment of the methods, the strategies and the products.

If steps are taken to examine curriculum development systematically, then the problem of vague goals will not persist. Each goal can be selected or discarded according as it is relevant or otherwise, translatable into practice or not, achievable within the constraints of the resources available or too ambitious.

Given the need to evaluate, how can evaluation be carried out? A common idea is that this should be the work of specialists and experts. After a fashion, this may be so. There should be expert advice as to how to plan for evaluation and to hone the instruments for data-gathering. Occasionally, interpretation of the results based on a large-scale operation needs the insights of the specialist. But a great deal too can be achieved without the expert.

Evaluation (particular problems aside) should be a participatory exercise in which curriculum developers, implementers (the teachers) and clients (the pupils) all take a part. Curriculum developers have their objectives and their strategies to evaluate. The teachers should be able to provide the feedback to developers on the relevance of the content to age-groups, to pupil interests and pupil ability. The clients, that is, the pupils should be able to provide information on whether they take to the diet prescribed or not. Here, the immediate complication which comes to need is that pupils' reactions may be affected by the teacher's poor grasp of the curriculum content or his poor method of teaching. For the same reason, a poor teacher is unwilling to accept change because it threatens his security, limited as he is in his own capacity to learn. But if evaluation has taken the right course at the beginning and resource inputs (among which teachers and methods are some) have been subjected to examination, it should be possible to assume that steps were taken to anticipate such problems and that teacher development has been considered a necessary concomitant of curriculum development. What goes wrong is that all too often teacher development is an after-thought, crashed into a form which produces more harm than good.

Despite these circumstances, the involvement of the teacher is important because of two considerations. First, involvement will draw him into a better appreciation of the purpose of the curriculum developed; secondly, his concern for pupils may be enhanced through this very perception of

purpose. To make the teacher a more effective ally in the evaluation process, it is important that evaluation methods should form a part of a teacher's training course. He would then be in a better position to set objectives, to specify areas and elements for careful scrutiny, to ask pertinent questions, to observe, to analyse and to draw conclusions.

I have walked into the classroom on many an occasion to observe practitioners at work. Always the teaching is fraught with rote-recall questions. What is this? When did this happen? Who was the pioneer in such-and-such a situation? And so on. On one such occasion, a teacher was belabouring his class in typical style with "what" questions, "What is rotation?", "What is resolution?", "What are the effects of rotation?" "What are the effects of revolution?", and these to a Secondary Four class. I sighed within myself as he hastened to advance reasons. After the lesson, for the deadpan silence of the class. According to him, the class were not forthcoming because I, a stranger, was there. Furthermore, they had been expecting a test, but he was attempting to give them a review. This they did not like. I then asked him whether he ever thought of framing his questions in a different way? For example: What changes would occur if the earth stopped rotating on its axis but continued to revolve round the sun? What would be different, if revolution stopped but rotation continued? What would happen, if both these motions ceased and the earth's axis became suddenly upright?

This narrative may seem an unnecessary excursus from the topic. But it does help me to make two important points. One is that teachers need to learn to sample more knowledgeably the many skills of learning in order to help provide effective feedback to the curriculum developers. Furthermore, just as the questions which teachers ask may be too feeble to draw discriminating responses, so evaluation in general can become an exercise in futility, if the instruments used are not sensitive enough for probe and search.

An instrument, generally relied upon for determining the "quality" of schools, is the public examination. I would suggest that instead of making too hasty a decision to abolish it (since it is likely that the baby may be thrown out with the bath water), curriculum developers in Asian countries, in which the public examination is strongly entrenched as an integral part of the education system, should consider how this institution may be made an effective ally in the evaluation process. It should happen that when curriculum development commences, thought and action should be addressed at the same time to the role of the examination in

providing feedback on how the new curriculum works. It can be made to foster the right approach to curriculum implementation. For it is still true that the examination is the tail that wags the educational dog. Too few curriculum developers take note of the potential assistance which traditional institutions such as the public examination can give. Change the types of questions in the examination, and the whole set of teaching modes in school will undergo change. Parents want their children to pass examinations; teachers are rated on how well they help their pupils as a group to pass examinations; schools are rated good or bad according to their yearly percentage of passes is high or low. To the idealistic educator these are illogical relationships. He says that many factors play a part in producing given results. He makes the case to show that a high percentage of passes may indeed cast doubt on the teacher's ability to teach: it merely highlights ability to force-feed. Be these situations as they may, the influence of examinations on the activities and teaching styles of the classroom is clearly not to be refuted or ignored.

Few Asian countries have the resources to embark on a comprehensive exercise in evaluation. The cost in terms of manpower and data-processing procedures may be prohibitive. Making use of the public examination, which already exists, may be the means for establishing base-line feedback. If the examination reflects the spirit of the new curriculum and if the pupils in schools respond to the demands of the new-type examination, it may not be too improbable a claim that the new curriculum is working. We may assume, for example, that, if pupils in schools, who have all the while been required to respond to rote-recall type examinations, do well on examinations requiring logical thinking and application of ideas, they would have had the benefit of classroom support for deductive and inductive reasoning and play with ideas.

Curriculum change, even in Asia, is no longer a mere fashion. It is now an inevitable fact, necessitated by a set of well-known factors. The popular demand for education has grown to such an extent that the traditional curriculum, academically-biased and geared largely to an elite clientele, no longer serves its purpose with a vastly expanded and heterogeneous school population. Technological progress requires that the preparation for new skills should be reflected in the curriculum. The explosion of knowledge within the half-century makes it imperative to sift and identify crucial elements for inclusion in the curriculum. Finally national aspirations and national status have also establish their claims for recognition.

So the case for curriculum development is made. In this paper I have assumed, therefore, that all Asia is already involved in the process.