

The Spark of Specifics

How a Strong Curriculum Enlivens Classroom and School Culture



BY DIANA SENECHAL

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, the Red Queen boasts, referring to a nearby hill, "I could show you hills, in comparison with which you'd call that a valley." Alice objects, "A hill *ca'n't* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense—" The Red Queen replies that she has "heard nonsense, compared

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with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!"¹

As a teacher, I have found curriculum to be both valley and hill at once, and at least as sensible as a dictionary. Curriculum is a valley in that it is often controversial; when you propose a common (i.e., shared) curriculum, things come toppling down from all sides. Policymakers and the public often object to a common curriculum because it includes this and excludes that; teachers often fear that such a curriculum will constrain their teaching. And yet, a curriculum is a hilltop; it gives us a view of everything around it: the subjects that should be taught, the shape and sequence of topics, the ultimate goals for students, the adequacy of textbooks and teacher training, the nature and content of assessments, the soundness of policies, and so on. Climbing from valley to hill is arduous, but once we establish what we are teaching, many things come clear, and the view is exhilarating at times.

A strong curriculum brings clarity to a school's endeavor; it has

practical, intellectual, and philosophical benefits. It gives shape to the subjects, helps ensure consistency within and among schools, makes room for first-rate books and tests, and leaves teachers room for professional judgment and creativity. It can be a gift to a community as well as a school; it can become the foundation for a school's cultural life. It is never perfect, but that is part of its vitality. It challenges us to think through it and beyond it. It does not solve a school's problems, but it offers good working material and a clear perspective.

Let us define curriculum as an outline of what will be taught. A math curriculum specifies the mathematical subjects, topics, skills, and concepts that students will learn in a given year. A literature curriculum specifies literary works, periods, genres, themes, ideas, and more. A history curriculum specifies the general area of history, time range, significant events and deeds, people, conflicts, questions, and ideas, as well as certain primary and secondary sources. In addition, the curriculum specifies some of the work that students will complete, from proofs to research papers. It is up to the teacher to decide how to present the material and how to structure the class time. The curriculum may come with sample lessons and various levels of support, but it is not a script.

The Finnish national core curriculum illustrates this definition well.² The high school mathematics core curriculum consists of an advanced sequence and a basic sequence. Here is the complete core curriculum for an advanced course called "Trigonometric functions and number sequences":³

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the course are for students to

- learn to examine trigonometric functions by means of the symmetries of the unit circle;
- learn to solve trigonometric equations of the form $\sin f(x) = a$ or $\sin f(x) = \sin g(x)$.

MATHEMATICS

- command the trigonometric relationships $\sin^2 x + \cos^2 x = 1$ and $\tan x = \sin x / \cos x$;
- examine trigonometric functions by means of the derivative;
- understand the concept of the number sequence;
- learn to define number sequences by means of recursion formulae;
- know how to solve practical problems by means of arithmetic and geometric progressions and their sums.

CORE CONTENTS

- directed angles and radians;
- trigonometric functions, including their symmetric and periodic properties;
- solving trigonometric equations;
- derivatives of trigonometric functions;
- number sequences;
- recursive number sequences;
- arithmetic progressions and sums;
- geometric progressions and sums.

These descriptions are concise and focused on the content.

Because of the coherence and careful coordination of the Finnish educational system—from teacher training to student exams—it is assumed that teachers will understand these descriptions and know how to translate them into lessons. Teachers in Finland have considerable preparation and autonomy; they may select the textbooks and determine how to teach the topics.⁴ We need not replicate the Finnish curriculum exactly, but we can derive inspiration from it. We can develop a curriculum that is much more specific than our current standards but still leaves the methods of instruction to the teachers.

Standards as we know them are not the same as curriculum. For example, most states' English language arts standards avoid mentioning any specific works of literature or even areas of literature; they tend to emphasize reading strategies over literary content.⁵ The recently developed Common Core State Standards

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improve on this by specifying certain categories of literature and including an appendix with high-quality text exemplars. (Full disclosure: I contributed to the text exemplars as a member of the English Language Arts Work Team.) Yet even with these details, the Common Core State Standards make clear that they are not a curriculum: "while the Standards make references to some particular forms of content, including mythology, foundational U.S. documents, and Shakespeare, they do not—indeed, cannot—enumerate all or even most of the content that students should learn. The Standards must therefore be complemented by a well-developed, content-rich curriculum consistent with the expectations laid out in this document."⁶

A good curriculum requires both vision and practicality. The curriculum writers must know and care about the subject; they must envision the teaching of the topics and works. They must be willing to make and defend choices—to say "this is essential," "this is beautiful," or "this goes well with that." At the same time, a curriculum cannot be the work of one person alone. Teachers and principals should be invited to contribute to it, the public should have a chance to discuss it, and it should be refined over time. Yet the multitude of contributions must not result in long, dizzying lists of topics and goals. Educator William C. Bagley wrote in 1934 that "American education has long been befuddled by the multiplication of 'aims' and 'objectives'";⁷ the problem persists today, and we should not make it worse. No matter how many people contribute to a curriculum, it should not lose its coherence and

meaning; it should not try to be everything at once, or it may turn into nothing.

Why is a curriculum essential?

Let us start with the practical reasons. First of all, when teachers know what they are supposed to teach, they can put their energy into planning and conducting lessons and correcting student work. If teachers have to figure out what to teach, then there are many moving pieces at once and too much planning on the fly. Also, there is too much temptation to adjust the actual subject matter to the students—if they don't take to the lesson immediately, the teacher may get in the habit of scrambling for something they do like, instead of showing them how to persevere. With a common curriculum, the teacher has the authority to expect students to learn the material.

For me, a great benefit of teaching in a school with a strong, coherent curriculum was that I could draw extensively on students' background knowledge. I could ask fourth-graders what they knew about the Middle Ages, and hands would fly up. It was exciting to direct the students in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and find that they understood some of the references to classical mythology. When my fifth-grade students were reading *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a passage reminded a student of a Robert Frost poem. She ran to the bookshelf, found the poem, and read it aloud. Again and again, students drew on what they had learned in their classes. The principle is obvious: it is impossible and undesirable to control everything that students bring to a class, but certain planned sequences can deepen and intensify the instruction.

A curriculum helps ensure continuity not only from grade to grade but from town to town. If a family moves from one town or state to another, a curriculum helps prevent needless repetition. I attended many schools when I was a child; it seemed that almost every year, until high school, we began by making a family tree for social studies and learning about sets and subsets in math. Many children endure units on "me and my community" year after year. (Sadly, this also happens to some students who do not change schools, but who attend schools where there is no curriculum and little or no coordination among teachers.) A curriculum would protect students against this kind of redundancy.

The list of practical benefits continues. Schools are in a position to seek out the best books possible when they know what will be taught. Teachers, working together and individually, may refine their teaching of certain topics over the years, since the topics will not be taken away. Materials that accompany the curriculum—such as tests and textbooks—can be strengthened if the curriculum is not constantly changing. Parents can tell whether or not their children are learning, since they know what their children are supposed to learn. Summer school, for students who need it, can ensure that students master the previous year's specific content and skills, and can also preview the coming year's challenges. Cities and towns may hold special events related to the curriculum—for instance, there might be a lecture on space exploration, a discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," or a performance of Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*.

Students might take field trips to attend a play or view works of art that they have studied.

What about the intellectual benefits of curriculum? I have hinted at them above. A curriculum allows a school or community to come together over a topic or work; it allows students, teachers, and parents to probe the topic more deeply. Teachers' professional development sessions may be devoted to topics in philosophy, literature, science, and other subjects, not just to the latest mandates and pedagogical techniques. Imagine a teacher seminar on Plato's *Republic*, Rabindranath Tagore's *The Post Office*, or Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*—how interesting that would be! When teachers have the opportunity to probe the very topics that they are teaching, to challenge each other, and to build on existing resources, they have that much more to bring to their students. The students, being immersed in meaningful subjects, will bring

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their learning to their families and friends.

I had the honor of visiting the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture in July 2010. The institute holds year-round events devoted to literature and humanities. At its Summer Institute for Teachers, school teachers immerse themselves in classic literature. This year, the Summer Institute focused on the epic tradition; teachers read and discussed the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Moby-Dick*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the *Theogony*; excerpts from the *Ramayana*, *Popol Vuh*, and *Paradise Lost*; and various short pieces. I was there for the first three days, which were devoted to the *Iliad*. It was a stirring experience to be among teachers and scholars who were reading and pondering this work. I had read parts of it in Greek in high school and reread it in English over the years, but I had not read it in full in a long time. Here I read it morning and night; read it urgently, dreamily, sleepily; read it with others, alone, aloud, and in quiet. When we reached the end, it was as though my mind had swept itself of litter. If we had more institutes like this, and if teacher training included courses of this kind, we could possibly see a slow transformation of the teaching profession. A teacher's daily work is typically filled with minutiae: he or she must decorate the classroom according to mandates, complete vague student goal sheets and in-class conference notes, and attend meeting after meeting where jargon reigns. A strong curriculum, supported by institutes of this kind, can help schools stay grounded in things that matter.

Just as a curriculum brings people together, it makes room for

solitary thought. Teachers need time to plan and think alone as well as with others. They need intellectual stimulation and challenge, quiet hours with the books and problems. A curriculum allows teachers to pursue topics in depth. If it is known that students will be reading Robert Louis Stevenson, then the teacher may delve into *A Child's Garden of Verses*—both for pleasure and for preparation. There is room to focus on something worthy. When there is no curriculum, teachers are kept busy but not necessarily in the best ways. After selecting what to teach, chasing after the materials, and putting together lessons, teachers have little time to think about the chosen topic, to consider different ways of teaching it, or to respond to students' insights and difficulties. A curricular plan, by establishing certain things, leaves more room for thinking, especially if administrators are careful to keep the peripheral duties to a minimum.



This leads into some philosophical reasons for a curriculum. A curriculum allows schools to uphold things of importance and beauty. We do children no favor by pretending all texts are equal, all opinions are equal, all writing is wonderful, and everyone is a poet; it is simply not so. There is poetry that makes the jaw drop and “poetry” that has not earned the name. Even if we disagree over what is good, we must dare to select the best. At my school with a common curriculum, when I directed my elementary school students in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, I saw how they took to the language. One boy had wanted with all his heart to play the role of Nick Bottom, and his zesty rendition made the audience roar: “The raging rocks / And shivering shocks / Shall break the locks / Of prison gates...” Once, when I was bringing the second-graders up to the fourth floor to rehearse, I reminded them, “Walk quietly, like fairies.” A girl chimed in, quoting from the play: “And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear!”⁸ It was clear that their imaginations had been fired up by Shakespeare's language. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was part of the fifth-grade curriculum; having students perform it was an extension and enhancement of this. Had the play not been in the curriculum at all, the production might have seemed an extravagance or impossibility. But because it was part of the curriculum, it was also part of the school culture. Even the younger students, who had never read any Shakespeare before, had heard of Shakespeare from the

older students. Some students read the play at home with their parents, siblings, and relatives. Teachers talked about Shakespeare in their classes and gave students opportunities to perform their scenes and monologues for their fellow students. Long after the final performance, Shakespeare was in the air.

As it makes room for things of importance and beauty, an excellent curriculum keeps fads at bay. If a school understands what it is teaching and why, if it is willing to defend its choices, then no random consultant or salesperson will be able to convince the school to buy the latest program, package, or gadget. When considering something new, teachers and administrators will ask themselves and each other, “Does this contribute to our curriculum, to what we are doing and what we value?” If it does, they might consider it further. If it doesn't, they will turn it down. There will still be distractions, fads, and jargon, but their clout will be greatly diminished.

Of course, conflicts do arise over curriculum. If we create a core curriculum for many schools and even many states, how can we ensure that it represents what schools and teachers deem important? What if a school doesn't like it but has to use it anyway? Doesn't that breed hypocrisy? What if a teacher has a radically different vision of a particular course? Must this teacher submit to the curriculum? What if the parents object to something in it? What if it conflicts with the religious views of some part of the community?

These are serious problems. Yet there must be a better solution than avoiding curriculum altogether or leaving it to individual schools and teachers. Today, in districts where each school devises its own curriculum, we have severe discrepancies and inconsistencies. One school teaches grammar, while another does not. One teaches the history of the Middle Ages, while another does not. Pseudo-curricula—pedagogical models without content—find their way into many schools, and state and national tests focus largely on skills.

The first school where I taught, a middle school in Brooklyn, followed the Teachers College “workshop model,” which specifies how to teach but not what to teach. In my subject, English as a second language (ESL), teachers were expected to adapt instruction to the students' varying levels and needs; there was no common body of literature or vocabulary that all students were supposed to learn. Soon I found that the same was true for English language arts (ELA); the primary emphasis was on reading strategies and writing processes. Teachers were supposed to bring “content” into their lessons, but all sorts of things qualified as content, and teachers could not rely on students' background knowledge from previous years. My school was by no means unique in this regard. New York City did not have a middle school literature curriculum for ESL or ELA; the curriculum consisted mainly of a pedagogical model and a set of strategies and skills. To have a literature curriculum, a school would have to go beyond what the city offered.

To some degree, I enjoyed the freedom to choose what to teach. I started a musical drama club for English language learners; in the first year, they put on a full production of *The Wizard of Oz*,⁹ and in the following years they performed *Oliver!* and *Into the Woods*. I introduced my intermediate and advanced students to classic literature: *Antigone*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Glass Menagerie*,

Animal Farm, and *The Old Man and the Sea*; some excerpts from Plato and Augustine; poems by Shakespeare, Blake, Poe, and Yeats; Sherlock Holmes mysteries; and various other works. These were challenging selections, especially for an ESL class, but students took to them, some passionately. My students read and discussed the Constitution and memorized the Preamble; they wrote bills and debated them in mock sessions of Congress. I gave them daily practice in conversation and writing; I gave grammar lessons and held spelling bees. I was proud and excited to see my students' enthusiasm for the literature; some of them wrote additional essays voluntarily, just because they found a work interesting. Like most new teachers, I struggled with classroom management, paperwork demands, and general exhaustion—but loved teaching and was proud of my students. I had kind and helpful colleagues and supportive administrators. Yet I began to long for a curriculum. I wanted to do the literature greater justice; I wanted to teach real courses, with a coherent combination of literary works. I wanted to teach grammar explicitly and systematically. It is not that everything must be fixed and regular—but when the topics are established, there is room to teach them in interesting ways and to learn from other teachers.

Wondering how New York City schools had come to emphasize strategies and group work over curriculum, I started to read avidly about education. I found much wisdom and inspiration in the works of education historian Diane Ravitch, Core Knowledge founder E. D. Hirsch, Jr., cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, and writers of the past, including William Torrey Harris, William C. Bagley, Michael John Demiashkevich, Isaac Leon Kandel, and Boyd H. Bode. I learned that many “new” approaches to teaching were not new at all; some fads had come back again and again under different guises. Reading Diane Ravitch's *Left Back*, I became fascinated with Demiashkevich (1891–1938), who put the education trends of his time in philosophical perspective. His writing sparkled with references to literature, history, philosophy, and mythology; one book led me to another. I traveled to Nashville to peruse the Demiashkevich Papers in Vanderbilt University's Special Collections and later wrote an article about his work.¹⁰ It was exciting to find kindred thinkers from whom I could learn so much. Upon reading Hirsch's *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them*, I became interested in the Core Knowledge curriculum for grades K through 8. I found the sequence and topics tantalizing: for example, seventh-graders read poetry by Poe, Dickinson, Tennyson, Blake, Service, Owen, Frost, Cullen, Eliot, Hughes, and Williams; study the Pythagorean Theorem; learn the geography of Western and Central Europe; learn about World War I and the Russian Revolution; and much more. At the end of my third year of teaching, I interviewed at a Core Knowledge elementary school and was offered a position that turned out to be rewarding, in large

part because of the curriculum. Both schools had strengths and weaknesses, but the curriculum at the second school was both solid and inspiring.

How can one curriculum serve many schools?

One essential feature of a common core curriculum is that it should not take up all of the school day. It could constitute about 50 to 75 percent of instructional time, and the rest could be left to the discretion of the states, districts, schools, and teachers. The common curriculum should be a beginning, not an end. Teachers should have the freedom to put their best thought into it and to show others what they have done in the classroom. There should be no shame over taking a moment to contemplate a topic during a lesson or go into its fine points. A sense of beauty and concrete learning are not at odds with each other, when both are given their place.



A good curriculum allows the mind to play. Just as a hundred musical variations can come from a single theme, so a rich variety of lessons can spring from a single topic.

At the Core Knowledge school, I worked with one of my second-grade classes on enactments of Christina Rossetti's poem “Who has seen the wind?” (included in the Core Knowledge curriculum).¹¹ The poem brilliantly blends the visible and invisible: “Who has seen the wind? / Neither I nor you: / But when the leaves hang trembling / The wind is passing thro' // Who has seen the wind? / Neither you nor I: / But when the trees bow down their heads / The wind is passing by.” One or two students would recite it while four others acted as the trees. By the end of the first lesson, most of the class knew it by heart. Drill and kill? Rote memorization? Not quite. There were so many children volunteering to recite it, I couldn't get to them all. During the second lesson, a girl started bouncing up and down in her seat and pointing at the window. “They're doing it!” she cried. “The leaves are trembling!” The others chimed in: “The wind is passing through!”

Another key to adopting a shared curriculum is a willingness to treat it as a living document. Any curriculum, no matter how well considered, should be reviewed and refined over time. Teachers and principals should participate in this process. This will inspire teachers, once again, to articulate and defend what they deem important, and it will lead to interesting discussions. In his forthcoming book, education professor Wesley Null describes the deliberative tradition of curriculum making. He defines deliberation as “the practice of using our reason, language, and emotions to appreciate one another's views while at the same time persuading others to follow what we believe is right.” It is not easy by any

means, nor is it coercive; it is “the opposite of screaming matches in which one side seeks to control the other.”¹² The more willingly we engage in deliberation, the likelier we are to arrive at a curriculum that all parties can appreciate. Disagreements will not disappear, but we will gain more insight into them, and the common ground we find will be sturdier.

As mentioned before, the teacher has great freedom with the kind of curriculum described here. The curriculum outlines the topics (and, for some subjects, the works) that will be taught, but the teacher may decide how to teach them. Those who need extra support may use existing unit and lesson plans. Also, since other teachers in the school and district will be using the same curriculum, any teacher needing such support will have many colleagues to turn to. The Core Knowledge curriculum, used by my second school, includes several levels of support. First, there is the Core Knowledge Sequence, which outlines what students need to learn in each grade and subject. Next, there is a parent and teacher guide for each grade (through grade 6) that describes the topics in more detail. Beyond that, there are numerous teacher and classroom resources, including guides, handbooks, planners, books, and videos.

A curriculum can offer both structure and flexibility. In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch describes a curriculum that consists of two parts or aspects: an extensive curriculum, in which students acquire the broad knowledge necessary for cultural literacy (e.g., the ability to participate in our democratic society), and an intensive curriculum, which provides for deep study of a subject. A dual curriculum of this kind allows for variation from school to school while specifying a body of common knowledge. For instance, all schools may teach Shakespeare, and all students may learn something about the best-known Shakespeare plays. Yet schools may choose different Shakespeare plays for close study.¹³ The specific selections allow schools to make interesting combinations. For example, if the curriculum included *King Lear* and Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, students might compare the treatment of folly in the two works after reading each work closely.¹⁴



Some may object that a curriculum should be spontaneous, not fixed, that the teacher and students should have room to delve into a topic that comes up unexpectedly. Educator and reformer Deborah Meier describes a time when the schoolyard at the Mission Hill School in Boston was full of snails, and the school embarked on a three-month study of snails.¹⁵ This kind of spontaneous investigation can delight the mind and inspire future study. It also takes tremendous teacher expertise and can easily go awry. A school should have the flexibility to devote extra time to certain topics, or to pursue a topic spontaneously here and there (which would be possible with a common core curriculum that took just 50 to 75 percent of instructional time), but it should do so judiciously and sparingly. An established curriculum has great advantages: teachers can think about it long in advance and schools can build their resources over time. Also, as interesting as “real-world” education can be, it needs a counterbalance; it is vital for students to learn about other places and times, and to work with abstract ideas.

Very well, then. Suppose we do have a curriculum.

What do schools need to implement a curriculum well?

Improved teacher preparation, textbooks, and assessments are all crucial. Teacher preparation programs should include courses on the curriculum itself. Prospective teachers should study the topics at advanced levels and consider how to present them to students. Education schools must honor subject matter as well as pedagogy. Teachers entering the classroom should have thought deeply about the subject they are to teach and should be well equipped with resources.

Textbooks should be of the highest caliber—free of clutter and full of clear, interesting, challenging material. As Diane Ravitch has pointed out, literature and history textbooks are too often crammed with pictures, graphs, charts, and pedagogical strategies, with little room for the text itself.¹⁶ The best textbooks, by contrast, are simple and elegant, with a great deal of knowledge conveyed in few pages. One of my favorites from high school is *A New Introduction to Greek* by Alston Hurd Chase and Henry Phillips, Jr. Each chapter begins with an explanation of the new grammatical material. This is followed by reading (including excerpts of Greek literature), vocabulary, translation exercises, review exercises, and sometimes an illustration at the end. I remember the excitement of reading one of Euclid’s theorems in Greek early on in the course. The theorem was unadorned, and this brought out its beauty; there was no condescension or distraction in the presentation. At the middle school level, Joy Hakim’s 10-volume series *A History of US* sets a fine example with its clear, elegant presentation and absorbing narrative.

Assessments must be based on the curriculum—not on standards. Otherwise, the tests will end up defining or constraining the curriculum (as they too often do now) in ways that the schools and public did not antici-

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pate. Teachers may find themselves under pressure to raise students' scores in certain skill areas, with little or no attention to the substance of their courses (or the long-term needs of their students). The federal government's rush to create assessments aligned to the Common Core State Standards suggests deep confusion about the distinction between standards and curriculum.* It also disregards the slow work that a high-quality curriculum entails and the improvements that could be made if we devoted ourselves to this work over time.

A good curriculum has no shortage of surprises. Far from damping the intellect and spirit, it allows the mind to play. Just as a hundred musical variations can come from a single theme, so a rich variety of lessons can spring from a single topic. But curriculum is not only a boon to the imagination; it is a necessity. Without a curriculum, we risk confusion, inconsistency, loss of common knowledge, and loss of integrity. Because every school needs some kind of structure, mandates will likely fill the void—mandates about how to arrange the desks, what to put up on the walls, what to write on the board, where to walk, and what to say. That is far more constraining than a curriculum. It is not easy to arrive at a common core curriculum, but the work is urgent, elemental, and lasting. Let it begin. □

Endnotes

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*In September, just three months after the final draft of the Common Core State Standards was released, the U.S. Department of Education awarded \$330 million to two consortia of states to develop assessments based on the new standards.