

For the Love of Learning

Volume II: Learning - Our Vision for Schools

Introduction to Volume II

Volume II describes our priorities for learning, from early childhood through secondary school. The chapters include discussions of curriculum content and organization, supports for learning, and learning assessment.

In this volume, we describe a "curriculum for literacies," based on the idea and the ideal that schools can effectively lead most children and youth to a high level of skill, and a deep level of comprehension, across a variety of subject areas. A key recommendation occurs in Chapter 7: full-time education should be universally available for three- to five-year-olds. We see this as one of the four engines that can transform an adequate educational system to a superior one.

We define the curriculum, broadly, as an educational program beginning as an option at age 3, and compulsory at age 6. It is a program whose goals and content must be clear to teachers and parents, whose mutually reinforcing efforts on behalf of young learners are the absolutely essential underpinnings of this long-term learning plan. That is why, throughout the chapters on the education of pre-schoolers, children, and adolescents, we emphasize that clearly stated, written descriptions of what students are expected to learn must be available to parents as well as to teachers. We believe that the curriculum - what children should be learning, and at what level of mastery - must be clear to parents, so they can help at home, in appropriate ways, and so that their dialogue with teachers on the subject of their child's progress is that of well-informed, well-respected, and equally powerful partners. While we believe there is no substitute for direct parent-teacher communication in respect of students, we also think it is important - and have built relevant suggestions on the subject into our discussion - that student achievement be monitored regularly and publicly, so that the community as a whole can be informed about the achievements of its young, and the effectiveness of its schools.

If it is to help almost all students reach an acceptable level of understanding and performance, a curriculum must have considerable flexibility to accommodate individual differences in the rate at which skills, knowledge, and understanding are acquired. Educators are familiar with the argument that we should make knowledge and achievement the constant, and time the variable, instead of the reverse; that is, we should have similarly high goals for students, and let them achieve them at their own pace, instead of insisting that everyone learn whatever they can in a set period of time.

Despite the familiarity of the argument, very few schools really allow flexibility in learning time. Every student is expected to learn enough between September and June - not too little and not too much - to be in the same "starting" position the following September. While it is understandable that neither parents nor bureaucrats are happy with extremely wide and non-standard fluctuations in learning time, we propose that much more thought be given to ways of helping students move faster, to avoid boredom, and to intensify targeted help for students having difficulties so they do not fall far behind. Such help,

especially when it comes early in the child's career as a student, has the potential of reducing later failures, which are extremely costly to the individual and to society, in the short and the long term. We are aware that this kind of intense, targeted, "just-in-time" help is difficult to provide: it is labour intensive, hence expensive; but it is important to remember that the help that is given later, through special education and remediation programs, is also costly and and less likely to be effective.

As well, the immediate interventions require considerable flexibility on the part of the school, the student, and the family, all of whom have to manage schedules so that the student is not absent from the regular classroom for any significant time, and can keep moving ahead with peers even while getting help. However, this flexibility is perhaps more a matter of attitude than schedule. The reason why such solutions are not already implemented in most schools is possibly because they require both more flexible thinking and a different way of distributing scarce resources - from both inside and outside the school system. But the difficulty of realizing them does not mean that these solutions can be ignored. Everyone must make a much greater effort to facilitate them.

The following chapters also suggest that educators must look at their students' progress over time, in the same way parents do: not just a year at a time, but continuously. We believe that a student needs a teacher at school who has a continuing concern for her progress as long as she attends the school. We are recommending that a kind of "case management" be exercised on behalf of every student - moving from a more administrative to a more "hands-on" style, as students grow into adolescence and shift into "rotary" systems where contact with any one teacher is normally quite limited. With the transition to adolescence, the role of steward or advisor takes on an educational and career-planning emphasis, with student, teacher-advisor, and parents regularly reviewing the student's experience, progress, and goals. We also suggest that parents and educators be encouraged to understand curriculum as a continuum from pre-school to post-secondary education and training. In fact, our discussion of curriculum begins, not at Grade 1, but at birth.

Finally, many of our suggestions and recommendations for a strong curriculum speak to the interdependence between schools and other learning resources. There is no question that schools do not have a monopoly on knowledge, and that teachers cannot be human computers. Nor can they be expected to be artists, scientists, business people, technicians, physicians, and social workers. But students need exposure to others in those roles and more, in order to define the goals they want to work toward, and to appreciate the link between curriculum and their future. Thus we have a great deal to say about community-based career awareness and more formal career planning and education. Parents and teachers are the most essential "life supports" in the education of the young, but, ultimately, a solid support system rests on a strong sense of community responsibility, which leads to a real sharing of resources devoted to the education of young people. We realize that what we are suggesting - a real sharing of the curriculum between educators and others - is a giant step beyond the occasional inter-agency collaboration or co-operative education program, and the like. However, we are convinced that it must happen. A solid curriculum rests on a belief by the whole of society that responsibility for supporting the education of young people belongs to us all, whether or not we have children in school. If that belief is to be acted on, government must be a facilitator, not a barrier, for concerted, not disparate, efforts.

We describe a curriculum that is rich, challenging, and inclusive, one that offers the possibility of developing all the talent we have and need in Ontario. But without dedicated and well-educated teachers, dedicated and well-informed parents, and a commitment from local communities and government to define themselves as resources for the learners who are our future, the best curriculum will be worth no

more than the paper on which it is printed.

Key issues

The major issues around which the debate about education and educational reform centres were discussed earlier in this report. They include quality, focus, fairness, openness, and efficiency. All these are closely related to curriculum.

The central questions are how to ensure comprehensiveness and relevance while avoiding overloading the curriculum; how to make the curriculum responsive to new social concerns, such as the environment, health, etc., without vitiating its long-term purpose in the transmission of culture and values; how to provide for a diversity of offerings to meet the interests of diverse clienteles while ensuring coherence and focus.(1)

Curriculum quality

Quality questions are curriculum questions: Are students learning enough, learning the right things, learning them at the right time, or learning them well enough? Our considered response is that the key quality issue is embodied in the last of these, the "well enough" issue. While evidence from some of the national and international test comparisons suggests that our students could be learning more,(2) it suggests, across several subject areas, that our students could and should be learning better: they should have less superficial knowledge and understanding, and be better able to synthesize diverse information, infer from and extend information, and generalize and transfer knowledge from one context to another. Too many students cannot apply what they have "learned," and this shows in their relative weakness when dealing with more complex components of measures of literacy and numeracy. In other words, it is not as much a matter of more quantity as it is of quality - doing what is most important, and doing it thoroughly.

Curriculum focus

Another major issue around which concern and criticism of the educational system cluster is that of focus and coherence. Applied to curriculum, this is expressed as a fear that schools are "all over the place," are trying to do too much, and, as a consequence, are doing too little really well. This is what is usually meant by the "overcrowded" curriculum, and often leads to the "back to the basics" call. This concern is most often expressed about the elementary school curriculum.

Is the teaching and learning of foundation skills being slighted, or are traditional core subjects being pushed aside by a multitude of other subjects that are part of the elementary school curriculum? In fact, most of the subjects presently prescribed have been part of the compulsory curriculum for a very long time - such subjects as language, math, science, music, history, French (or Anglais), geography, and physical education.

There are a few that were added more recently: the arts now include dance; and technology and business studies were not always taught in the earlier grades. And within such traditional subject areas as physical and health education, for example, additional topics have been added: AIDS education is now part of the health curriculum because the disease is so dangerous and the need for education for prevention is so urgent. Curriculum, like many other areas that are important and in which careers are spent, expands - it never shrinks. New topics are added, but there is never agreement on what no longer need be taught.

Teachers are also concerned that having to deal with a number of topics in a finite period tends to move them toward superficial coverage and over-dependence on methods that do not permit students to explore, question, try alternative solutions, and, in general, reach a real understanding, rather than a superficial familiarity useful only for short-term recall. It has often been said that it is too easy for curriculum to become a mile wide and an inch deep. Educational researchers looking at comparative international success rates observe that in countries where students excel in mathematics, for example, the math curriculum tends to be less extensive and more intensive, so that material is learned very well the first time, is thoroughly comprehended, not merely memorized, and does not have to be re-learned over and over again.

While teachers and parents may feel that the curriculum is overcrowded, in our opinion the array of subjects included in *The Common Curriculum* does not, by itself, make this inevitable. If course guidelines seem to mandate too much content, and do not suggest to teachers how to condense or integrate, then the curriculum will be overcrowded.

Teachers need a curriculum which is well defined and clear, with sequences of learner outcomes by subject area, illustrated by topics with examples, to ensure consistency and cumulative learning. Teachers need guides on taking apart a well-sequenced and cumulative curriculum, and on putting it back together.

We believe that well-written curriculum guidelines and support documents can show teachers how to enrich without adding on how, in effect, to accomplish more than one thing at a time. For example, teachers may perceive co-operative, small-group learning, which is a teaching and learning technique; anti-racist education, which is a focus on equity in the curriculum; and mastery of a body of knowledge - for example, the pre-European contact history of Canada - as three different teaching "assignments." In fact, Canadian history is the content, and the topic naturally lends itself to informed discussions of culture, race, and racism in history. The co-operative small group is part of the process.

If the classroom is racially heterogeneous, and the small groups are structured to reflect that mix, if the teacher understands and has made sure that students understand the prerequisites for successful small-group work, the exercise will automatically become a piece of anti-racist education with a high potential for decreasing intolerance and barriers between groups. Such examples are an important part of curriculum support materials, and every effort should be made to facilitate teachers' knowledge of, and competence in, this kind of process/product curricular integration.

We think the real issue is not curriculum crowding but curriculum clarity. Both data and anecdotal evidence suggest that students are not overburdened - generally, the amount of homework they have is moderate to low by international standards. Their agendas do not appear to be overcrowded, though their teachers' well may be. We believe there is sufficient time in students' days and weeks for physical exercise and for learning the essentials of health, for example, without cutting into the time needed for the language, mathematics, or the arts and sciences curricula. We also think that the fitness and health curriculum could be delivered by people from the municipal recreation department, the public health department, and other community agencies, and that teachers would benefit from being able to put more time and focused thought into planning and delivering the academic curriculum.

It is essential that subjects and topics form some kind of meaningful whole or pattern, both at the level of an individual course, made up of component parts, and at the level of the program, made up of many courses over a year or over several years.

Fairness and openness

People ask about the curriculum: Is it constructed so that people with different strengths and paths to learning are equally well accommodated? Does it shut out or give greater advantage to certain groups of people or certain types of learners? Does it recognize and honour the cultures, languages, and histories of the school's students and their families, and of this country?

Phrases such as a "representative" or "pluralistic" curriculum are used to reflect this concern for fairness and inclusiveness. An authentic curriculum is inclusive, and it is also global in that it reflects a broad range of experiences and perspectives.⁽³⁾

A science curriculum, for example, which acknowledges only the contributions to science of men of European heritage is incomplete and therefore incorrect, leaving female and minority-group learners at a disadvantage. A curriculum on the history of railway building in Canada that does not reflect the role and the treatment of Chinese workers is also incomplete and incorrect, distorting what really happened. Similarly, there is every reason to ensure that the curriculum reflects the global village of which Ontario is a part. Over the course of a school career, students should have access to quality literature - not just Canadian, American, British, and French, but that of many other countries.

Inclusiveness relates not only to curriculum per se, but to the issue of openness. In speaking to the Commission, many people made the point that they find the education system a closed one; that, although the public funds education, the public is not allowed "in." The culture of schools typically defines the curriculum as exclusively the province of educators, which parents and others may, at best, observe; they may make suggestions, but not seriously influence planning or delivery. Not surprisingly, parents often experience this as conflicting with their understanding of public education as democratic and inclusive, as well as with the schools' frequent assurances about the value of parental involvement for children's achievement.

Furthermore, interpreting the whole curriculum as necessarily the exclusive property of educators means that one of the most promising ways of "uncrowding" it is not pursued. On the one hand, teachers complain of being overburdened by having to cover a wide variety of topics and concerns that are essentially non-academic: drug education, for example, or health and safety. On the other hand, they cannot (or they believe they cannot) delegate some of these responsibilities to non-teachers.

We suggest that, on the contrary, there are many things schools and teachers should not necessarily do by themselves, or do alone, but which should and could still be available to students. If teachers are to focus on academic learning and on teaching so that students understand, if teachers are to develop truly literate learners, they must not be diverted by a multitude of important but non-academic issues. Teachers must, most certainly, care for and about their students as persons; if they do not, or if they seem not to, their effectiveness as teachers is extremely limited. Moreover, a student with serious personal problems that are not dealt with will not only be unable to learn well, but may prevent others from learning by acting disruptively or diverting the teacher's attention.

Fortunately, in specific curricular, as well as extra-curricular areas, there are others who might be available, whose training might be equally or even more suitable, and who might appropriately take on tasks that involve teaching, but need not directly involve teachers. While the potential of community alliances is discussed more fully in a later chapter of this report, its specific application to the curriculum is explored in this section. We refer to a few specific areas of the traditional curriculum that could be

delivered by teachers, among others, but not necessarily or principally by teachers. We suggest that community alliances for delivering the broader curriculum can help schools become more focused and more inclusive, open, and responsive. Examples include health and fitness curricula, social skills curricula such as anti-violence and "peacemaker" programs, arts activities, and career education.

Efficiency

In Ontario, curriculum writing has been more decentralized than in other provinces. Like many of those we heard from, we see little benefit in the current duplication of effort that exists in developing curriculum that way. Local boards, as well as some schools, are expected to do detailed curriculum planning and writing, in the absence of more centralized production of possible course units and sequences. We believe this function can be efficiently centralized, and done in a way that facilitates teachers' work, allowing them to focus on teaching without constraining their professional development or creativity.

We recognize the validity of recent attempts by boards and the Ministry of Education and Training to share the work of each board among all boards (e.g., the Curriculum Clearing House), and encourage continuation of that effort, as a result of which many valuable resources have already been developed. But we think the time has come to centralize the development of new curriculum. We expect that this would lead to the use of fewer teacher resources within school boards for responsibilities that take them out of schools and classrooms.

In saying this, we do not intend to prohibit local efforts when boards or schools feel some compelling reason to make them; and the local curriculum option we propose could provide such a reason in some cases. But we do propose that the documents needed to supplement *The Common Curriculum* be developed centrally and disseminated to all boards and schools, and that the same rule apply to curriculum for the early years and for the specialization years.

In Chapter 5 (on learning) and in this volume, we make the case that the curriculum in Ontario's schools must be representative, inclusive, and academically honest and ambitious. In a system like the one we suggest, in which curriculum is developed provincially, the Ministry of Education and Training has a strong responsibility to make certain this focus is integrated into future curriculum development.

In 1993, the Legislature of Ontario passed Bill 21; among other provisions, it required school boards to establish anti-racism and ethno-cultural equity plans that would focus on such things as curriculum; student languages; guidance and counselling; and student evaluation, assessment, and placement. This means that each school board must develop policies in each area. We support the development of such policies, but are concerned about duplication in the preparation of curriculum and other materials and procedures that will result. We believe that curricular changes necessary to implement such new policies should and can be developed once, centrally, rather than a hundred times.

We note that, in his report on race relations, Stephen Lewis made similar suggestions. He recommended, for example, that the new Assistant Deputy Minister of Education for Anti-racism, Equity and Access "establish a strong monitoring mechanism to follow-up the implementation of multicultural and anti-racism policies in the School Boards of Ontario." He also suggested that the province's leaders "continue to pursue, with unrelenting tenacity, the revision of curriculum at every level of education, so that it fully reflects the profound multicultural changes in Ontario society."⁽⁴⁾ We agree, and want to emphasize our strong belief that as a priority in its new responsibility for developing curriculum, the

Ministry must ensure that all curriculum developed in Ontario is anti-racist, gender equitable, and representative of all people of Ontario.

In the section of this report dealing with governance and regulation of the educational system, we recommend a procedure for the centralized creation of curriculum. It is our firm expectation that whoever the Ministry may appoint to carry out any particular piece of curriculum development will be able to draw on the rich human resources in curriculum that exist in Ontario's school system. This would ensure continued sensitivity to regional differences and to the needs of the francophone and Roman Catholic components of the school system. Their interests will be represented by the existing French-language team as well as the Roman Catholic education policy and program team whose creation we recommend.

When centralization of curriculum is discussed currently, the discussion often embraces the idea of a national curriculum. Formal education in Canada is and always has been governed provincially (and even aboriginal students on reserves follow provincial curricula). But the Commission heard from many people who advocate a national curriculum.

Over the last two years, the first national assessment program, organized by the Council of Ministers of Education, has been established, and we have begun to see inter-provincial co-operation in developing curriculum at the regional level. Whether this interprovincial co-operation will become a driving force in creating a national curriculum remains to be seen; certainly, it seems to have been possible to reach agreement on testing in spite of the lack of a uniform curriculum.

Whether or not it is possible for Canada to have a national curriculum is probably more a political than an educational question. At the practical, pedagogical level, it is certainly plausible. We do not expect that fundamental skills and core curricula would vary greatly from province to province. We believe that the public would support an interprovincial initiative to create a framework for a national curriculum, specifying expected outcomes for elementary and secondary education across Canada.

At the same time, we do not believe that a national curriculum means that students would learn more - only that there might be a greater sense of consistency and unified purpose in education. The quality of education and learning for Ontario's students does not depend on greater centralization at the national level.

In its 1992 report, Newfoundland's Royal Commission on Education⁽⁵⁾ recommended that an examination be made of

the possibility of introducing a federal presence in education; in particular, the creation of a national office of education. Such an agency would address national goals for schooling, establish national standards for the collection of educational data, conduct national education assessments, and serve as a centre for the information on education research and improvements.

Unlike that Commission, we do not want to promote a constitutional debate about a move that might not do much to transform the quality of education in our province. But we applaud the intention of the Council of Ministers of Education to explore the possibility further. Such discussions would be welcomed by people who want greater consistency in educational goals and standards across Canada; we also recognize that some national activities could offer economies of scale.

Strategies for improvement: A learning system that focuses on the learner and on literacies

We are convinced that a learning system, emphasizing serious learning and more of it, is needed; and that it must really be a system, with a strong focus and purpose and strongly linked component parts. The curriculum should embody that focus and those goals, rather than allowing content unrelated to learning and literacies to "crowd" the curriculum.

How systematic is what we have now? To what extent does it focus on learners and learning? If we define sophisticated literacies not elementary knowledge and understanding of subjects - as our overall focus, how would the system have to change?

The system

Whether we choose to call formal education in Ontario a learning system, an education system, or a school system, we must ask whether it is a system at all. A system is a whole, not a collection of unconnected parts; it has purposes and goals that are consistent throughout. Do we have a system in education? The recent reorganization of three governmental departments education, colleges and universities, and skills development into the Ministry of Education and Training, makes it clear that such a system is the goal. But reorganization by itself does not a system make.

Formal education begins, as an option, at age 4; it is compulsory from age 6 to 16; and must be provided free to anyone through age 21. As well, an increasing number of adult students are also being educated in the public schools, at the discretion of local boards.

Thus there is, if not a cradle-to-grave provision for free public education, at least a continuum that occupies many years of the youth of all of our citizens, and that reaches out to adults.

Whether all parts of that system mesh is another question. Presumably, if we had clear agreement and indicators about what all adults in our society need to know, our universal education system would rest on a continuum of knowledge and skills learned in sequence. While there is no such explicit continuum, the formal curriculum of schools does reflect an assumed agreement about what should be learned, and when. Although the connections are not always clear or smooth, definite principles underlie what children and youth are expected to know and to do, based on an assumption that learning is cumulative.

But this assumed continuum is also characterized by transition points, and it is around these points that systemic continuity falters, that disconnectedness and disagreement about program are most likely to occur. These transition points are as follows: the transition to school (at what age? teaching what content?); the transition to adolescence (what must change at school because of changes in the situation of the learners?); and the transition to post-secondary education and work (how should education be similar or different for the entire range of students who will reach this point? to what extent should the next stage of life affect the curriculum of secondary school?). In order to make a system of the whole, or a whole of the system, there must be, first, a focus on the learner; and second, a focus on literacies, from the beginning to the end of formal schooling.

The learner

In the last few years, educators have attempted to define curriculum in terms of results rather than content: the focus has moved from what is taught to what is learned. We are aware that there are pitfalls

to this approach (which may convey an unrealistically linear view of learning), and that no single strategy can create perfect social consensus about what schools and education should be and how we evaluate their success. Nonetheless, we believe that the general idea of measuring the quality of the curriculum - by looking at its effects on what students learn - is sound. It gives momentum to the push for more and better student assessment, which we think is essentially healthy in a province that has collected very little information on student achievement (see Chapter 11). It can also contribute to a better-articulated learning system, one in which each level builds clearly on the one before it. Moreover, it challenges the practice of thinking of curriculum as something to be delivered in specified, uniform time units (e.g., a course is 110 hours in secondary school, no matter what the subject or who the students) rather than as bodies of knowledge and skills to be acquired.

As well, if we are interested in knowing what students have learned, rather than simply what they have been taught, our interest can encompass other learning experiences, outside the classroom. The system can recognize what we all know and appreciate - that learning happens in every setting, and that good learning is generalized from one situation to another.

A curriculum for literacies

In our opinion, nothing matters more to society or to individuals than learning. If schools are truly learning communities, schooling, by definition, will be enriching, challenging, and intellectually rewarding.

Reading, writing, and communicating are essential tools across all knowledge domains, and underlie mathematical, scientific, technological, and artistic literacy. But if education is meant to help learners become capable of understanding and adding to an array of knowledge that will enrich and improve their lives and the life of their communities, the fundamental need is for more than basic literacy. It is also for advanced, high-level literacies that enable people to continue to learn, not to be easily stuck when a new problem comes along.

We believe that most parents and members of the public want secondary school graduates to be "well educated," a term that includes both the notion of being well informed and of having intellectual skills. Being well informed signifies being conversant with bodies of knowledge - being well informed about literature, or art, or science; having intellectual skills suggests knowing how to organize information, frame questions, test an argument, generalize from specifics, and relate knowledge in one domain to that in another. Being well informed in an area *and* having intellectual skills to apply to that information is what we mean by literacies.

Whether the topic is literature, painting, science, history, or mathematics, the literate person brings certain skills to it, including the ability to read efficiently and accurately. Although "reading" a painting or an experiment is different from reading a poem or a play, it is still reading. As well, literate persons express themselves accurately and not clumsily in writing, speaking, or in other forms of communication they may choose, including music, languages, or science.

Broadly defined, literacy is understood as being able to speak, read, write, and reason and to have sufficient knowledge of history, science, literature, art, and, increasingly, technology, to be able to hold or follow a conversation or argument that depends on prior exposure to facts and ideas. According to this definition, a person who could not write a letter that was both expressive and grammatically correct, or could not follow a science article in a newspaper and note whether it included unsupported assertions, or

who could not understand a layperson's book about computers, or who did not know who Aristotle or Mahatma Ghandi was, or who did not know how to use a reference library or, increasingly, a computer, could not be called fully literate.

The common meaning of "literacy" is much narrower and more specific: it is learning to read and write, the first task of schooling, beginning in Grade 1. Educators now know that pre-school and kindergarten experiences, as well as the learning environment of a child's home, have strong effects on the quality and speed with which basic literacy is acquired in the primary grades, and this knowledge relates very directly to our recommendation concerning early childhood education. And much is known about how to ensure that all children can learn to read and write in those years.

Many parents, representatives of business, and other bodies told the Commission that they were concerned about whether Ontario's students are achieving satisfactory rates of literacy; many of their briefs focused on the early years of schooling, on basic literacy, and on the quantity and quality of instruction young children receive in reading and writing. There is wide consensus that the early years of school are critical to later success, and that literacy is the key to the whole. The matter can be more complex for children who come to school with a first language that is not the language of schooling, but the necessity of developing strong basic literacy skills, early, remains unchanged.

Basic literacy, achieved early, is the foundation for the higher literacies. Building a strong, early foundation will result in an upgraded curriculum at all grade levels, and in students who make greater progress in learning, in learning how to learn, and even, we fervently hope, in learning to love learning. As a result, their expectations and those of their teachers and parents would rise, and students' attainment levels with them. A stronger foundation in early literacy would also diminish the learning disadvantages some children bring with them to school, and is one of the best strategies for ensuring that the curriculum is built on standards that are appropriately high and attainable for most students. Ultimately, this is the best way to prevent later categorization by class, colour, and national origin, and to build an excellent and equitable education system.

We agree that literacy is the appropriate focus, as long as it does not stop at "basic" literacy. The literacy we believe children and adults need, and that schools should recognize as their primary goal, goes beyond basic to what we call the higher-level "literacies." Children must, of course, learn how to translate print into speech, and speech into print, and they must be able to demonstrate that they can do so.

But literacy goes beyond simple decoding, not only in language, but in all subjects. Real literacy means being able to go beyond factual recall, to the ability to be critical about what one is told or reads; literacy, to us, means having genuine understanding, so that what is learned does not depend just on rote memory, but is not easily forgotten and can be generalized and applied to new situations, so that it serves people throughout their lives.

We suggest that this higher-level literacy, also referred to as critical or higher-level thinking, involves the same cognitive skills applied to all subject areas. Therefore, we can speak not only of literacy in relation to learning and using language, but also of mathematical, scientific, technological, and artistic literacies. This higher-level literacy is closely linked to language, because language is inextricably linked to thought, no matter what the specific content of that thought.

The teaching of language should aim for more than the achievement of linguistic

competence; it should attempt to improve communication and critical thought.(6)

The literacies across the curriculum

There is a transition to life; there is another transition when a child starts formal schooling in Grade 1; there is a transition into adolescence; and another when a youth is getting ready to move out of the school system and has to make decisions about where to go from there.(7)

In Chapters 7 through 9, we describe a "curriculum for literacies" in three stages, roughly corresponding to these three transition points or phases in human development. We find these transition points - the transition to formal schooling, to adolescence, and to work or career education - a useful framework for considering the development and needs of learners, and think of them as "learning transitions," because learning and total human development are inseparable. The developmental framework also underlines the reality that health, broadly defined and including emotional health, is a pre-condition for optimal learning.

The first learning transition is to life, and describes the cognitive development of the infant and toddler; the literacy curriculum for learners from birth to age 6 is discussed in Chapter 7. The next transition is to formal, compulsory education in school, and, about six years later, there is a third transition, the biological and social transition to adolescence. Both occur while children are in Grades 1 to 9, and we describe the literacies curriculum of these years as the "common curriculum," acknowledging that while the subjects in the curriculum, and its universality across all students, do not change as students enter adolescence, some of the organizational aspects of schooling, and the emphasis on future planning and decision-making do. Finally, there is the transition to adulthood - to independence, choices about the future, employment, and family formation - what we call the transition to post-secondary life, describing that part of the literacy curriculum (in Chapter 9) as the "specialized curriculum." (8)

While the definition of literacies broadens and expands at each of these transitions, what remains constant is that it always focuses on enquiry, expression, and understanding; it is about the learner's growing capacity to deal intelligently with information.

Endnotes (Introduction)

1. UNESCO, International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, *Learning for the Twenty-first Century* (Paris: UNESCO, 1994), p. 8. Prepared by G.S. Papadopoulos.
2. Philip Nagy, "National and International Comparisons of Student Achievement: Implications for Ontario." Report written for the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning, 1994.
3. A.G. Hilliard, "Why We Must Pluralize the Curriculum," *Educational Leadership* 49 (December/January 1991/92), p. 12-
4. Stephen Lewis, "Report on Race Relations," 1992.
5. Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Delivery of Programs and Services in Primary, Elementary, Secondary Education, *Our Children, Our Future: Summary Report* (St. John's, 1992), p. 20-21.

6. Premier's Council of Ontario, *People and Skills in the New Global Economy* (Toronto, 1990), p. 27.
7. Premier's Council on Health, Well-Being, and Social Justice, *Yours, Mine, and Ours* (Toronto: Ontario Children and Youth Project, 1994), p. 33.
8. We are using the term "common curriculum" to describe the curriculum of Grades 1-9 and "specialized curriculum" to describe the curriculum from Grades 10-12. We use these terms in preference to "elementary" and "secondary" for two reasons. First, this division is confusing, in that "elementary" will connote Grades 1-6 to some, 1-8 to many, and 1-9 to still others. Second, we think that the two terms suggest a degree of difference in curriculum and school organization that may be exaggerated to an undesirable degree.

ISBN 0-7778-3577-0

©Copyright 1994, Queens Printer for Ontario

[Home Page](#)

[Search](#)