



# Knowledge Matters

*Restoring Wonder and Excitement to the Classroom*

## Top Three Takeaways

### A shared curriculum:

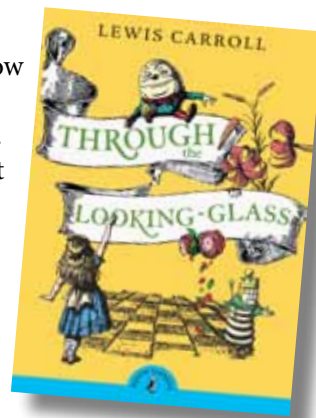
1. Results in students developing a shared body of knowledge that deepens their interactions and learning.
2. Enables teachers to meaningfully work together and spend time thinking about how to teach (instead of what to teach).
3. Provides an opportunity to collaboratively choose the best texts and to reject fads.

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## Creating Community: The Benefits of a Shared Curriculum

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 *can't* be a valley, you know. That would be nonsense—" The Red Queen replies that she has "heard nonsense, compared with which that would be as sensible as a dictionary!"<sup>1</sup>



As a teacher, I have found curriculum to be both valley and hill at once, and at least as sensible as a dictionary. Curriculum—which I define as an outline of what will be taught, *not a script or even a set of lesson plans*—easily becomes a valley of controversy; 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 classroom assessments, the alignment of state assessments, the soundness of policies, and so on. Climbing from valley to hilltop 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.

A good curriculum requires both vision and practicality. The curriculum writers must know and care about the subjects; 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

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wrote in 1934 that “American education has long been befuddled by the multiplication of ‘aims’ and ‘objectives’”;<sup>2</sup> 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.

It is not enough for individual schools to boast strong curricula; some common basis is needed for schools overall. 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 as well as state and national reading tests, which pretend to measure what students have learned yet sidestep the content of such learning. Through their purported focus on skills, they ignore the incontrovertible ties between knowledge, vocabulary, and comprehension. A shared curriculum could allow for high-quality tests of subject matter—tests for which students could study productively.



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A shared curriculum not only allows for meaningful assessments but helps ensure continuity from grade to grade, school to school, and town to town. If a family moves from one town to another, the 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.

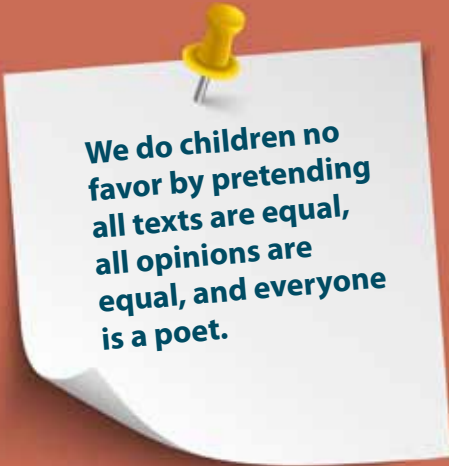
The list of practical benefits continues. Schools are in a position to seek out the best books possible when they know what will be taught. Teachers, working together and individually, may refine their teaching of certain topics over the years, since the topics will not be taken away. Materials that 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 their learning to their families and friends.


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







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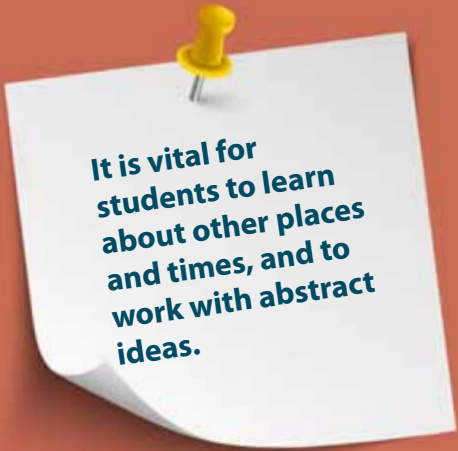
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students will be reading Robert Louis Stevenson, then the teacher may delve into *A Child's Garden of Verses*—both for pleasure and for preparation. There is room to focus on something worthy. When there is no curriculum, teachers are kept busy but 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. In 2008, when I directed my elementary school students (at a school with a strong curriculum) 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!”<sup>3</sup> It was clear that their imagination 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 established course of study, it was also part of the school culture. Even the younger students, who had never read 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.

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.<sup>4</sup> This kind of spontaneous investigation can delight the mind and inspire future study. It



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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 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.

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 shared curriculum, but the work is urgent, elemental, and lasting. Let it begin.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* (New York: Norton, 1999), 162.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Bagley, *Education and Emergent Man: A Theory of Education with Particular Application to Public Education in the United States* (New York: Nelson, 1934), 120.

<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (New York: Washington Square, 1993), 1.2.29–32, 2.1.15.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Meier, *In Schools We Trust: Creating Communities of Learning in an Era of Testing and Standardization* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 20; and Deborah Meier, “‘Data Informed,’ Not ‘Data Driven,’” *Bridging Differences* (blog), Education Week, March 5, 2009.

*This article is adapted, with permission, from “The Spark of Specifics: How a Strong Curriculum Enlivens Classroom and School Culture,” which appeared in the winter 2010–2011 issue of American Educator.*

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