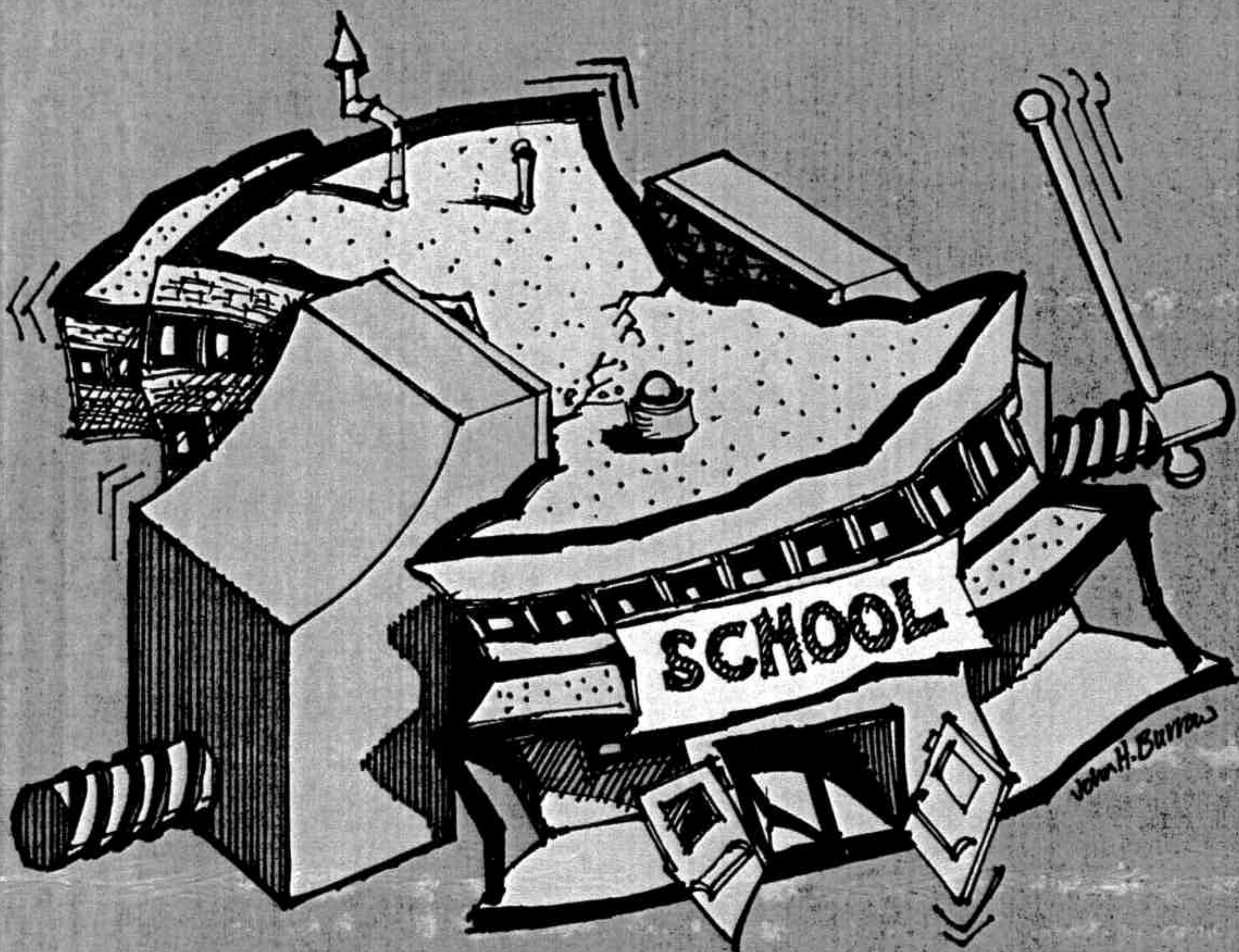
the ata magazine

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 1985
THE ALBERTA TEACHERS' ASSOCIATION



SCHOOLS:
Caught in the Grip of Recession

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The Alberta Teachers' Association
Volume 65, Number 2
ISSN 0380-9102

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Official publication of The Alberta Teachers' Association. Barnett House, 11010 - 142 Street, Edmonton, T5N 2R1; telephone 453-2411, long distance 1-800-232-7208. Southern Alberta Regional Office, 540 - 12 Avenue S.W., Calgary, T2R 0H4; telephone 265-2672.

Published January/February, March/April, May/June and November/December. Member of the Educational Press Association of America. Members of The Alberta Teachers' Association automatically receive *The ATA Magazine* and *The ATA News*. The combined subscription rate for non-members is $20.00. Single copies are $3.00. Opinions of writers are not necessarily those of the Association.

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Cover design by Sherryl Petterson. Illustration by John H. Burrow.

No Grasp of Social Reality: The Alberta Social Studies Curriculum

A pervasive philosophy of value relativism undercuts its presentation of ethical obligations.

By T.E. Flanagan

The Alberta Social Studies Curriculum, which was revised in 1981, contains certain shortcomings that deserve serious consideration from classroom teachers who deal with it and from those who may consider modifications to it in the future.

This curriculum, which grew out of the dissatisfaction with the "new social studies" of the early 1970s, as revealed in the Downey report of 1976, has in it much that is praiseworthy. Admirably organized, it covers an ambitious sweep of subject matter; any student who learned it all, or even most of it, would be well educated, indeed.

It focuses on serious questions, such as government intervention, environmentalism, and foreign affairs, about which Canadian citizens ought to be informed. Most important, it frankly acknowledges its purposes of moral instruction: "Effective citizenship is the ultimate goal of social studies" (p.1). Since public schools no longer offer religious or overt moral instruction, social studies can help to fill the void. "Effective citizenship" seems to me to be an appropriate moral goal for a pluralistic society such as our own.

Unfortunately, the curriculum is self-defeating in its approach to moral education because a pervasive philosophy of value relativism undercuts the presentation of ethical obligations. Value relativism is the view that right and wrong are ultimately matters of subjective personal preference. The term *value* is indicative in this context; it is borrowed from the economic theory of marginal utility, where it refers to subjective desires to be fulfilled in the marketplace. Calling a virtue such as honesty a "value" puts it on the same level as a good dinner—both become objects of personal desire. Importing "values" into moral discourse is a departure from the older insight that right and wrong are matters not of taste and preference but of conformity to rules of conduct.

This distinction is blurred in the curriculum. "Values," reads the document, "are basic or fundamental ideas about what is important in life; they are standards of conduct which cause individuals, groups and nations to think and act in certain ways" (p.4). This overly broad definition confuses the goals which we pursue with the moral rules under which we act. The latter are, as the philosopher Robert Nozick has called them, "side-constraints" within which we try to obtain the things we value. I may like hockey and you may like jazz, but we are both bound by a network of moral and legal rules in our attempts to enjoy our favorite amusements. We must follow certain "rules of the game"; for example, purchasing tickets rather than stealing them, standing in line and conducting ourselves decorously during the performance.

The curriculum is rather ambivalent in its treatment of moral rules. They are introduced early (Grade 2, Topic A), and the students are exposed at many levels to the Kantian notion of generalization (in the Role Exchange Test, New Cases Test, Universal Consequences Test, Subsumption Test). But since rules are subsumed under values, students are not given any good reason to regard these tests as important. Why should I care if my "preferred rules" (p.21) can pass the Kantian tests? Very few who shoplift from Safeway would wish that corporation to ring up their totals on faulty registers, but systematic moral instruction should be able to offer reasons why the relationship of honesty must be reciprocal. Here the curriculum fails completely. It can do no better than to urge students to reflect upon their "values" and to retain the ones that seem right to them.

It is understandable why the curriculum does not try to justify moral rules in terms of divine will or natural law; for such arguments, no matter how powerful they are to some, will not be universally plausible in a secular and pluralistic society. But that does not mean the task of justification has to be abandoned. Ethical principles can also be developed in a humanistic way with the welfare of man in society as the criterion of good and evil. It is not hard to show, for example, that we will all be better off on the average if we mutually refrain from lying, cheating, stealing and murdering. These are not subjective value preferences; they are objectively necessary rules of conduct that are observed in all societies.

The failure to develop a rational basis for moral obligations is a glaring weakness in the curriculum which fatally undermines its higher purposes. As part of "effective citizenship," the curriculum wishes to make students tolerant of the values of others, sensitive to environments, objective about evidence and argument and competent in working with others. These are laudable goals, but there is nothing in the curriculum to make the student rationally espouse them. If he proclaims his "values" to be authoritarian and self-

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righteous certainty, that is intellectually respectable.

Another regrettable consequence of this value relativism is a frequent misperception of the social issues around which instruction is organized. Each topic has a central social issue which is said to represent a conflict of "competing values." For example, in topic 9B, "Selected Centrally Planned Economies," the social issue is "Should governments have the right to restrict personal freedoms in the interest of the state?" and the competing values are "Individual Freedom" and "Government Control for the Common Good" (p.68). But this terminology almost totally misrepresents the problem. The advocates of the market and the advocates of central planning generally claim to share the same goals, such as economic efficiency, a high material standard of living, full employment, social mobility, availability of leisure and recreation and flourishing of the arts and education.

The debate is an instrumental one concerning the best means to achieve these ends. Can central planners allocate productive resources more efficiently than the "invisible hand" of the market? This question has both theoretical and empirical aspects, and both can be addressed by rational methods. Presenting the question as a clash of relative values does a grave disservice to students by cutting them off from the contribution which reason can make to providing the answer. This happens repeatedly in the curriculum, giving students the impression of an existentialist universe where everything hinges upon personal choice and commitment.

As harmful as this tendency to convert even objective, scientific problems into value conflicts is the curriculum's tendency to pose "social issues" in unreal terms. Typically, a large-scale social process which is not under the control of anyone in particular, least of all of any government, is presented as a problem of public policy. For example, the curriculum proposes as a model social issue, "Should the Inuit change under the influence of modern technology?" The student is supposed to formulate a policy to deal with the issue: "What government policies could be created to implement the decision on the social issue" (p.4).

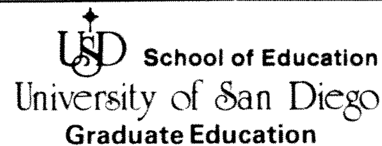
The whole approach is unrealistic. The Inuit have been profoundly affected by Western technology ever since fur traders and whaling ships started visiting the Arctic. No government policy short of turning the Arctic into a theme park could keep these people from acquiring rifles, snowmobiles, canned food and television sets. The impact of technology results from the accumulation of a multitude of decisions by individual Inuit. No one is in charge of the process of technology transfer, and it is entirely misleading to have students pretend they are in charge, even as an intellectual exercise. Wisdom comes from learning about action and reaction in a world of interdependent people, not from "solving" non-existent "problems."

> Value relativism and a propensity for posing unrealistic questions are manifestations of the curriculum's underlying flaw—a failure to grasp the objectivity of social reality.

Grade 12 students are asked, "Should nations set aside national goals and ideals in the interest of international harmony?" Again, the question is unrealistic. Nations cannot set aside national interests any more than individuals can set aside private interests. Any nation that did so would quickly become the prey of others. Implicitly recognizing the futility of the question, the curriculum directs the students to "resolve the issue by predicting the effects of nationalism and internationalism on selected contemporary situations and choosing the action judged most acceptable in terms of one's own value position (p.87). We are back to value relativism. Since the problem as posed has no answer, all that is left is moralistic posturing. The outcome is paradoxical. Students are urged to study the world so they can "solve problems," but in the end the only solutions they can provide are subjective preferences.

Value relativism and this propensity for posing unrealistic questions are both manifestations of the curriculum's underlying flaw—a failure to grasp the objectivity of social reality. The human world is not just a projection of our intentions and desires. Social order emerges from the action, reaction, and interaction of enormous numbers of individuals. In this matrix, the unintended consequences of actions are far more important than the intended results; for others bring their own initiatives into play in response to mine. This steady interplay of actions produces an objective social reality, governed by its own laws, which is not under anyone's direct control. Fixing the price of a commodity below its market value will tend to produce a shortage, whatever the intention of the government may be and whether the commodity is rental accommodation in Manhattan, corn in Zambia, or fresh vegetables in East Germany. The purpose of instruction in social science should be to help students grasp the objective realities of the world they inhabit, not to construct hypothetical worlds according to "one's own value position."

This is particularly vital in a liberal democracy. More than any other form of government, liberal democracy presupposes self-directing citizens who can pursue their own values within a necessary framework of rules of conduct. Since there is no public religion to support these socially necessary rules, citizens must have reasons for obeying and expecting others to obey them. This rational defense of morality, in turn, presupposes an objective world where actions have consequences apart from intentions; in such a world, principles of morality conducive to general welfare can be learned through experience and reinforced through rational reflection. Unfortunately, this is not the world that is portrayed in the 1981 curriculum. □



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