

## **Curriculum Analysis and Critique**

### **Second Step Grade 5**

Second Step is a violence prevention curriculum. It is a universal program, meaning it is taught to all students in a classroom rather than to a select group of students. The curriculum has four levels which include Preschool/Kindergarten, Grades 1-3, Grades 4-5, and Middle School/Junior High. The purpose of Second Step is to teach social competence and reduce social and emotional problems in children. The research behind the development of the curriculum states that children with weak social and emotional skills are at risk for developing problems in school, as well as in the workplace as adults. Aggressive children are at particularly high risk for developing serious problems in adolescence and adulthood. Research also shows that the school and the home are the most important environments for children to learn social and emotional skills. Therefore, educators must use the opportunities in the classroom to teach these skills in a positive manner.

Second Step teaches several skills important to social and emotional development. These skills include empathy, impulse control and problem solving, and anger management. The curriculum is arranged so that one unit is dedicated to each of the three skills. Each unit builds upon the next. The design of the curriculum is intended to help children use the skills in their everyday interactions with others, especially their peers. Research shows that this is essential for children to succeed socially and avoid aggressive behavior.

#### **Context of the Development of the Curriculum**

Second Step was developed at a time when violence in schools was increasing in frequency. Several major incidents occurred in our nation's schools around this time, making national news. These incidents included school shootings in several places including Jonesboro,

Arkansas (1998), Springfield, Oregon (1998), and Littleton, Colorado (1999). Each of these incidents made many wonder why this happened. According to Parkay, this created a renewed effort to understand the origins of youth violence. The development of Second Step is an answer to this concern by teaching students the basics of empathy, problem solving, and anger management. The hope is that teaching these skills will reduce the incidence of school violence.

The Second Step curriculum (third edition) was written in 2002. This was a time with a greater and renewed emphasis on developing curricula for an increasingly diverse society. Historically, it fits into the views of Progressivism. One of the important points of progressive education is that it addresses the interests and needs of students, including citizenship. Second Step teaches students how to be good citizens by teaching how to solve conflicts without using violence.

There are several social forces behind the development of Second Step. The most obvious is crime and violence. According to Parkay, the following is an estimate of the number of school-based crimes committed in the United States each year: 12,000 armed robberies, 270,000 burglaries, 204,000 aggravated assaults, and 9,000 rapes.

Another social force is lack of purpose and meaning. Research shows that students who lack purpose and meaning in their lives are more likely to engage in violent behavior and criminal activity. There are many reasons students today lack purpose and meaning in their lives. One reason comes from the political context in America, where there is a lack of shared values. In addition, the role of community in the lives of our youth has changed greatly over the past several decades. At one time, the youth of our country received support from members of a community, and were able to find a place to fit in. The community filled in any gaps left by family support. Today, students without support from family and adults at school are likely to

feel they have little purpose or meaning in their lives.

Changing values and morality is another social force behind the development of this curriculum. One of the biggest reasons for changing values and morality is the changes in the American family over the past several decades. Many children have experienced the divorce of their parents. Most of these children live in a home headed by a single parent who may need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Other children live in homes where both parents work outside of the house. This means that many children go home to a house with no adult supervision for several hours. These changes that influence the amount of time children spend with parents, as well as the changes in the role of community mentioned above, leave part of the responsibility of teaching values to our schools. Many educators believe that the curriculum should include teaching values and positive character traits to students. Second Step teaches the important character traits of empathy, impulse control, and anger management.

The increase of ethnic and cultural diversity is also behind the development of the Second Step curriculum. This increase in diversity is one factor in the development of gangs, which increases the chances that our students will be involved in some sort of violent act. Second Step teaches students alternatives to violence for solving problems and looking past their differences.

### **Orientations and Values the Curriculum Represents**

Second Step follows the values of progressivism, as defined by John Dewey. He believed that there is a close relationship between actual experiences and education. He said, "...a positive and constructive development of its own basic idea depends upon having a correct idea of experience." (Parkay, Anctil, & Hass, 2006). When new information is taught, it should have a clear application to everyday life. The ability to manage anger is an important part of

life, and students will be able to relate the concepts in Second Step to experiences they have had, or will have in the future.

Another important part of progressivism is citizenship. This curriculum teaches students some important aspects of citizenship, such as caring about the needs and feelings of others (empathy), problem solving without violence, and anger management. According to William Heard Kilpatrick, each learner should grow up to be a worthy member of the social whole. He says, “The newer school aims explicitly to have its pupils engage actively in life, especially in socially useful work within the community, thus learning to manage life by participation in life...” (Parkay, Ancia, & Hass, 2006). Students learn how to be a part of this social whole through active participation. Second Step allows students to participate in problem solving for scenarios and situations that they have encountered, or may encounter in the future. People always have the opportunity to make a “good” choice or a “bad” choice. Teaching children how to make good choices is a critical part of Second Step.

### **Purpose and Content of the Curriculum**

The purpose of Second Step is to teach students how to solve conflicts without violence. This purpose is met by teaching important social and emotional skills. These skills are reflected in the content of the curriculum: empathy, impulse control and problem solving, and anger management. Our emotional reactions in social interactions, as well as our behavioral habits, can affect the way we control our impulses and manage anger. The purpose of this curriculum is to address these emotional responses and behavioral patterns, and to help students to make better choices when faced with a difficult situation. The content of Second Step is based on the foundation of empathy. The following two units build on this important skill taught in the first unit.