Curriculum for Democracy

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Two teachers are leaving a meeting of a committee which has been trying to evaluate the program of their school in terms of citizenship education:

ALICE BLACK—I shudder when I think of how glibly I used to talk about the fact that the chief function of the secondary school is to teach the skills necessary for living in a democratic society. Work with this committee is making me change my whole philosophy of education.

BETTY TORD—Is the change for the better or for the worse?

ALICE BLACK—I don’t know—but at least I’m becoming more realistic. We might as well admit that you don’t teach citizenship. A good citizen is one who has acquired certain skills which can’t be taught but are absorbed.

BETTY TORD—But isn’t it our job to see that the school atmosphere is such that those characteristics which are desirable in a democracy can be both absorbed and practiced?

ALICE BLACK—Ideally speaking, yes! But practically speaking, no! We can give everyone a chance to talk about how to cooperate and how to do creative thinking and planning. But again I say, let’s be realistic! It is certainly true in our school that only a small group of the leaders has much contact with real democratic activity. Isn’t this inevitable? Don’t we actually teach most of the students to conform? I know you’ll say, as Mr. Miller did in the meeting this afternoon, that this is a philosophy of the elite. But isn’t that necessary for a group of immature, inexperienced high school students?

Alice Black is not alone in her perplexity. Any school staff which is seriously concerned about the responsibility for providing a program which will help all youth acquire the skills necessary for democratic living realizes the difficulties of the task. But never was the need for such a program more challenging than at the present time.

If we conceive of our democratic society as being dynamic and changing, one of the most important democratic skills is that of being ready for and helping to direct change. In order to do this we must have a sense of direction and must be aware of goals toward which we are working; we must frequently evaluate our progress and see where new thinking and planning needs to be done; and we must do creative thinking about how to improve the situation. These skills, like all others, are developed as we practice them and not by just talking about them. In the past we have deprived adolescents of such practice in schools and have seemed to expect that the skills would miraculously appear with maturity.

Many of the desired learnings do come as a result of living in a democratic environment and of participating in group activities. But the degree of intelligent ma-
turity that we want secondary school graduates to have must come from the experience of living in a school community which operates on democratic principles plus an analysis of those principles and techniques. Without this analysis patterns of behavior may be merely copying rather than creating new patterns to meet new needs.

**Growth Through Class Experiences**

The content of the curriculum itself can be directly related to the development of these skills. Most schools that are making curriculum changes are trying to help the students find the facts and acquire the understandings necessary for intelligent citizenship.

Typical of this emphasis are courses which help students analyze sources of information and help them understand different media of communication. Language-arts teachers are replacing the usual themes about such topics as “What I Did On My Vacation” with writing activities which grow out of the students’ experiences in science and dramatics and other areas; with real and not make-believe letters written to persons in other countries; with letters written for materials and for information which the group desires; with records of business meetings held by different groups in the school; with the preparation of mimeographed materials to be used by other students; and with the writing of news items for both the school and the community newspapers. In the field of oral communication teachers are attempting to utilize all available chances for functional learning of important skills. They have done much to help students develop the ability to tell with clarity and meaning of their own experiences and ideas they have gained from others. In some schools the staff is justly proud of the large number of students that effectively participate each year in assembly programs and appear before various school and community groups.

Many mathematics teachers are utilizing functional opportunities for learning. For example, students keep the records and do much of the mathematics work connected with the school’s supply store, the cafeteria, the students’ activity fund; they survey the school property when changes are to be made and use many other situations connected with the life of the school.

Social studies groups are giving great emphasis to the development of democratic skills. They are concerned with the problems of consumers, the organization of cooperatives, community problems relating to health and an endless number of vital and important phases of our life today. Many teachers of these groups believe that the development of the skills of problem solving, use of a wide variety of materials, and changes in attitudes and points of view are as important as the content itself.

The increase in the amount of time allotted for general education in the secondary school does much to facilitate changes in the actual content of material studied and makes it possible to organize the material around areas which are meaningful from the standpoint of skills for intelligent citizenship.

**Total School Learning**

All these attempts to teach the skills through revising the content of class experiences are good, but they do not furnish the total answer to the problem of teaching the basic democratic skills. It is possible to have a situation in which excellent provision is made for functional learning but in which the thinking and planning is all done by the teachers and the activities are “assigned” to the students. In this way students do not have practice in the actual planning of the program; they do not have practice in evaluating their experiences and deciding which phases of the program need more emphasis; they do not have a chance to initiate a plan of action and do creative thinking as to ways and means of meeting their goals. The administrators and the teaching staff have all these learning experiences.

Each member of the professional personnel of a secondary school should be concerned not only about the opportunities offered in his particular area of work with students but with those present in the total experience of the school. Three of these skills which the secondary schools can help develop and which involve the total school program are skill in planning, skill in devising cooperative rather than competitive situations, and skill in human relationships.

**Skill in Planning.** This is probably the most basic of all our democratic skills and one which has been most neglected in the past. In some of our more static secondary
schools planning is almost nonexistent. The administrators simply keep the machinery oiled and the groove in which the machinery runs is well worn. In other secondary schools planning is periodically done by administrators and others of the staff and then students are informed about new plans.

As the whole program of the secondary school becomes more flexible and more functional there is increased need for continuous planning and it is important to establish planning groups which meet regularly. Students should be included in such groups. Some secondary schools have devised planning machinery which includes administrators, teaching staff, students, and parents and have found that it not only furnishes experience in the planning process but that it produces better plans. Eisenhower said recently in discussing military planning that when you put sea, ground, and air forces together you multiply rather than add the value of their separate powers. And so when students, parents, and professional staff become concerned about the total school program and have opportunities to think together you multiply rather than add the value of their separate contributions.

Many teachers have realized the value of group planning of classroom experiences and this is good preparation for the planning of larger group activities. All group planning must be based on a sincere belief in the principles involved and not be used as a sort of trick. To conduct a poll occasionally to see what changes students would like to have made in the school program is not a desirable kind of planning. There is a great difference between having students express ideas which "come off the top of their minds" and having them express opinions which come as a result of serious group discussions by both students and teachers.

It is important that there is some group organization established such as homerooms or core groups and a possible (not inevitable) time allotment so that all school issues can be discussed in small groups. Later discussion in large assemblies may be valuable but student committees that are responsible for making decisions should frequently report to and get the benefits of the thinking of these small groups where all participate.

The statement is often made that this kind of planning is possible in the smaller schools but not in schools with several thousand students. Rather than being an impossibility the situation serves as a challenge to the creative thinking of the staff members of the very large school. If it is important that our citizens learn the techniques of group planning and gain the feeling of responsibility for group welfare which comes as a result of such planning, then responsibility cannot be dismissed by saying that a particular situation makes it difficult. A junior high school in Atlanta, Ga., for example, has set up a series of "little schools" within the large metropolitan school as a way of personalizing the school program.  

Skill in devising cooperative rather than competitive situations. The fact that we have overemphasized the value of competition as a motivating force is evident in the reports from different schools about the recent scrap and paper drives. Those schools that depended upon competition between groups within the school were more effective at first; but in the long run, those schools that emphasized group effort for a common cause had better results. It seems extremely inconsistent to deplore the ruthless competition in the adult world, to do a lot of talking and moralizing in assemblies and homeroom periods about the need for cooperation, and at the same time to pit group against group, class against class, when we want to "get results." We do not learn to cooperate by talking about it. We need to actually experience it, to run into some of the difficulties and see how they may be overcome, and then to experience some of the benefits.

The secondary school staff which seriously tries to help its students develop skills in cooperative work has a tremendous task. Much needs to be done to change the traditional patterns of marks, awards, and honors which glorify individual competitive endeavor. By constantly utilizing opportunities for group endeavor and giving prestige and recognition to projects which result from cooperative enterprise, the staff can do much to eliminate the competitive emphasis which is characteristic of so many school activities.

Skill in human relationships. The individual classroom teacher can probably do more than anyone else to help students develop  

techniques for getting along with their peers. The way in which students are grouped can itself be a contributing factor in developing this skill. The grouping for at least part of the school day should be such that students in planning their activities can discover and utilize widely varying abilities.

It is important that students develop skill in getting along with persons outside the school community. This can be facilitated by such things as exchange assemblies with other schools or by inviting representatives of several schools to discuss common school problems or to discuss and work out solutions for community problems in which the several schools might cooperate. Joint constructive work does much more to build skill in establishing desirable human relationships than the competitive situations which usually characterize inter-school activities. Practice in getting along with persons from a very different environment might be gained if a rural school sponsored a vacation work project for students of a city school. The city school, in turn, might sponsor such a project for students from the rural school. We have just started to explore the possibilities for widening the first-hand experience of students, and as this develops one of the important results should be increasing skill in relations with people.

Looking Critically at Results

It is valuable for a secondary school staff to periodically examine the total program of the school to find what concepts of democratic living the students are getting from talking together and from reading, what they are observing, and what chances they are having to practice some of the basic democratic skills. Some questions a staff might ask are:

- Do our students see the staff exhibiting real respect for personality in their relations with each other and with students?
- Is our administrative set-up such that the teaching staff feels frustrated and passes this frustration on to students by finding scapegoats? Do the students in turn make scapegoats of other students?
- Are we more concerned with insuring equality of opportunity in far distant situations than in our immediate environment?
- Do we give students time to browse, to explore new interests, and do creative thinking and planning which will lead to student initiated activity or do we try to prescribe what they shall do and think every minute of the school day?
- Do our activities give practice in dealing with real situations and real problems or are many of them play-acting? Do we find it less disturbing to have a mock United Nations Conference than to have students participating in solving the problems of the school?
- Is the organization of our student government functional? Does it carry out the principle that the form of government should be suited to the needs of the group or are we copying the form of organization of the national government and thus fostering the idea that there is just one form of organization for everything called “government”?

- Do we put such a premium on efficiency and good results that we deprive students of the chance to learn from failure?
- Are we helping parents and members of the community to realize that the “learnings in process” in school activities are as important as the end result?
- Do the students realize that an important technique in developing a concern for other people is to know other people? Do teachers exemplify this technique by really knowing the students?
- Do we expect immediate learning and consistently high levels of skill by our students or do we realize that these less tangible skills, like the more tangible ones, require repeated chances to exercise the skill?
- Does our counseling service provide opportunity for each student to have help that he may become increasingly expert in self-evaluation?
- Do we help each child gain status with his peers or do we, by ability grouping and similar techniques brand some people as “inferior”?
- Does the staff help the students assume more responsibility gradually or is too much responsibility given too suddenly?
- Have we developed techniques for gathering evidence as to whether or not the students are actually growing in self-direction?

- Do the more advanced students have occasion to analyze and become aware of the democratic principles which are operating in the school so that they can intelligently apply them in a new situation?