

What We Are Talking About.

The variety of concepts concerning the meaning of "general education" make a statement of definition desirable. This brief editorial by Hollis L. Caswell, director, Division of Instruction, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, N. Y., serves as an introduction to the articles that follow, and represents the point of departure for the planning of this issue.

GENERAL EDUCATION! Common learnings! Basic education! Core curriculum! These are terms much in the educational literature today. Their wide discussion reflects a deep concern with a curriculum problem which is of first importance and which is far from satisfactorily solved. The essence of this problem can be indicated by a question: *What educational experiences should all individuals have in common?*

The focus of concern is with the non-vocational and non-specialized aspects of living. What is required to assure intelligent and responsible citizenship? What is necessary to enable the individual to establish and maintain sound personal relationships?

In dealing with this matter certain general points may be held in mind with advantage. First, terminology is greatly confused, as is so often the case in educational discussions. Core curriculum is used by some to refer to the required courses in the high-school program of studies, by others to mean a course in which two subjects are correlated or integrated, and by still others to indicate a series of experiences organized around social and personal problems and concerns without regard to subject. General education is used by some to refer to the non-specialized courses on the college level, by others to indicate particular courses in the high school, and by still others to mean all phases of the curriculum which are not vocational or professional in character. Intelligent discussion requires constant recourse to definition of terms.

Second, this problem has very important historical antecedents. On the collegiate level the long-standing objective of liberal education provides important relationships. It might be said that the traditional approach to liberal education undertook to determine what non-specialized education the intellectually elite should have in common. This tradition has exerted a great—and, in the writer's judgment, detrimental—influence on efforts to provide a suitable general education for all the people. On the school level, the tradition of literacy and memory of historical facts about our national life as the essential elements in education for effective citizenship greatly influences current considerations of common educational needs.

Third, the issue has frequently been confused by the assumption that uniformity of learning is what is desired. This moves in the direction of fixed standards and conformity. Such a trend is in conflict both with the democratic ideal of individual development and with the nature and extent of individual differences. Rather,

the emphasis should be on common objectives and areas of experience. To illustrate: All people are consumers. Effective functioning in this area requires considerable knowledge and skill. It seems reasonable that schools should contribute to this needed education and provide every student with educational opportunities designed to make him an efficient consumer. But to assume that all will thereby become equally able in meeting consumer problems is obviously absurd. The same applies to any other area which may be mentioned.

Fourth, major conflicts in educational philosophy and psychology are sharply revealed in various proposals to deal with this problem. Two recently published reports illustrate how widely separated both theory and practice are on the issues involved. The report of the Harvard Committee, *General Education in a Free Society*, is from the background of the liberal arts college tradition. It proposes that a plan designed with a selected student body on the college level in mind be made the basis of general education in the high school as well. The dominant emphasis is on selection of those aspects of our culture about which a person should be informed in order to qualify as an "educated man." The 1945 yearbook of The John Dewey Society, *The American High School: Its Responsibility and Opportunity*, approaches the problem from the point of view of helping young people grow up in our present complex society and achieve a sound, constructive place in it. Education is viewed as a matter of guiding the growth of individuals. The curriculum is conceived as a vehicle for aiding youth to achieve behavior patterns needed to deal adequately with problems and concerns of personal and social consequence. Knowledge and skills are seen as means to improved living. Concern for all youth, irrespective of ability, is central.

The critical differences between these reports could be further elaborated but that is not the point here. The important thing to recognize is that educational issues of the most fundamental sort are involved in the various solutions that are offered. Educational workers must be aware of these issues if change is to result in progress.

The high-school curriculum is particularly in need of improvement in its provision of a "general" or "basic" education. The influence of the elective system has been quite as great on the high school as on the college. There is at present no assurance at all that students will receive educational experience in a number of important common areas of living. College entrance requirements provide about the only influence toward a basic program and, in general, they lead to the selection of subjects most poorly adapted to the large group of American youth and remote from problems and conditions of day by day living. Clearly, the high-school curriculum requires the acceptance of a new principle of organization which is based on the need of our society for the education of all youth for constructive participation in the common activities of living.

This is not to suggest that the problem should be overlooked in the elementary school. Attention is required from the earliest part of the school program through the college to adult education. Continuity of learning is a principle which should never be ignored.

HOLLIS L. CASWELL

Copyright © 1946 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.