

# Curriculum Bulletins Tell a Story

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That course of study and curriculum bulletin production is a major activity in many American school systems today is a generally accepted fact. The extent to which such guides are used and their influence in improving school programs are, however, questions open to careful consideration. After an examination of 450 such bulletins for elementary schools, Pauline Hilliard, editorial associate in the Bureau of School Service, University of Kentucky, Lexington, poses the question, "To what extent do these bulletins indicate a concern for social learnings necessary for today's boys and girls?"

THOUSANDS OF TEACHERS in the schools of our country turn to their local, city, or state courses of study and curriculum bulletins for guidance. Does the help they find there release or bind, strengthen or weaken, stimulate or repress? What opportunities and provisions do these materials afford for social education of the children in the elementary school?

The interpretation of the term social education or social learnings is basic to the evaluation of curriculum materials. The viewpoint taken here is that any learnings which come through working as a member of a group to meet group and individual needs may be termed social learnings. These include not only those learnings in the social studies, but also those which accrue from solving everyday problems of living with other people.

## Evidence from the Children

Comments from children serve to show something of the broad scope of the problem:

"We want to play basketball. They always choose relays." *A comment made while a group tries to decide how to use their play period.*

"Aw, I don't want to sit by Mary." *A remark about an underprivileged child who comes to school not too clean.*

"Don't choose Bill. He'll just make a mess." *Group painting scenery for a play.*

"I need some help to build a dry cell battery to run my motor."

"They never have what I like to eat in the cafeteria."

"I'd be scared to death to talk before all those people." *A child's answer when asked to make the announcements for an assembly program.*

This list, expressing a few of the problems children face, could extend almost interminably. However, these suffice to indicate how social education includes many areas of interpersonal adjustments. Children have their problems and do something about them—desirable or otherwise.

Teachers need to recognize that social learnings—good or bad for the individual or others—are taking place within all groups. Those persons who have a share in planning school programs have a responsibility to recognize and use opportunities for helping children meet and solve their problems of personal and group development through intelligent planning and action. Cooperative, intelligent planning and acting

must happen *with* children as well as be planned *for* them.

### The Basis for Conclusion

An attempt is made in this study to point toward trends in using opportunities for social learnings as set forth in recent curriculum bulletins and courses of study. Included also is a statement of selected problems and questions for those interested in developing materials that afford opportunities for desirable social learnings for children.

The study was based on an examination of approximately 450 pieces of material.<sup>1</sup> They included general courses of study and bulletins in social studies, science, language arts, health, arithmetic, physical education, art, and music.

Most of the materials were produced by representative teacher committees, working with the guidance of a curricu-

<sup>1</sup> The research for this study was done while the writer was research assistant for L. Thomas Hopkins at Teachers College, Columbia University, in the preparation of *A List of Outstanding Teaching and Learning Materials*, ASCD, 1948.

lum director, supervisor, or visiting consultant. A few were the work of individuals. In only very rare instances were children, parents, and other lay people included in planning and setting the direction for the school program.

### The Generalizations that Resulted

Outstanding characteristics noted in the materials examined may be summarized in the following statements.

1. There is frequently a wide divergence between the philosophy, as expressed, and the practice recommended. The chart below points to a few specific differences noted.

2. There are usually circumscribed and set areas within which to operate. Several unit topics picked at random from courses of study illustrate varying degrees of control:

*How Do Men Travel and Carry Goods in a Community?* (Grade I)

*Discovering How People and Goods Are Transported* (Grade III)

*We and Our Neighbors* (Grade III)

#### We Believe

The school's program should be planned to meet children's needs.

Children learn best when they are interested and feel a real purpose in doing an activity.

Democracy is realized through participating, making decisions, and *even* mistakes. Cooperation is essential to our democracy.

People learn to solve problems only through recognizing and solving their problems in everyday living.

Self-evaluation is important for improvement.

#### but

We set up subject matter goals for achievement.

The school's program is largely designed and planned without giving children a voice in making selections.

There is much evidence of domination of children by administration and teachers. There are few opportunities for a real choice.

Children are "given" problems and told what to do.

Most evaluation is done by teachers.

#### We Practice

*Community Living in Alaska* (Grade IV)

*Learning to Use the Map and Globe* (Grade IV)

*Pioneers of the West* (Grade V)

A few plans include resource units with a wealth of suggestive teaching materials from which a teacher may select and adapt those things that meet the needs and interests of a particular group.<sup>2</sup> Others outline understandings, skills, and subject matter as end points of accomplishments.

3. In most instances there are opportunities for teachers and children to make choices and plan within a selected area, but a limited number of bulletins point toward the use of that freedom for pupil-teacher planning.<sup>3</sup>

4. The suggested lists of activities accompanying many of the units or plans of work make possible more and varied pupil participation.

5. Many courses of study and bulletins contain lists of working and resource materials that are inclusive enough to be helpful to the busy teacher.

6. There is much emphasis on book resources and less on those which afford first-hand experiences.

7. There are few explanations of suggestions on how to make use of resources in creative, cooperative ways.

Based on the assumption that the social learnings of children should better enable them to meet individual and

group needs, there are some questions which those people interested in planning school programs might well consider about the courses of study and bulletins which point the way in those programs.

#### What About Pupil Participation?

*How much freedom is allowed within the framework of the plan:*

*for pupil selection of areas of interest and problems of work?*

*for pupil and teacher planning on how to solve a selected problem?*

If we truly believe that the ways of democracy are learned through cooperative participation by those concerned and that people learn to solve their problems only by solving them, our plans for school programs must allow freedom of choice by teachers and children. Any course of study which sets up as end points of achievement certain subject matter learnings or pre-arranged problems cannot hope to be all inclusive enough to meet unique and individual needs, even in so limited a thing as subject matter—to say nothing of helping children make the necessary adjustments in human relationships.

We admit the importance of pupil-teacher planning, but because the ways are new and difficult we frequently lapse into old practices of telling children what their problems are and pre-

<sup>2</sup> Long Beach, California has recorded resource units from grade two through eight. The philosophy set forth in the introduction of the Resource Units recognizes the value of rich and varied experiences through which children learn the techniques of democratic living. Each unit includes statements of (1) objectives or anticipated physical, social, intellectual, emotional and spiritual growth of the child, (2) some generalizations which will probably result from the study, (3) overview of the unit as actually experienced by a class, (4) additional suggested experiences and opportunities within the area, (5) lists of illustrations and informational materials and (6) bibliography.

<sup>3</sup> Two bulletins which record and analyze pupil-teacher planning experiences are Kansas City, Missouri, *Cooperative Planning, a Committee Progress Report*, 1946; and Philadelphia, *Living and Learning, How Boys and Girls Grow Through Life Situations*, 1945.

scribing ways to arrive at desired outcomes.

It is not to be expected that children will grow up knowing how to plan and make decisions intelligently without guidance and the experience of doing just that. The wise teacher helps children recognize and explore a problem, look for help in solving it, and weigh the possible solutions and their outcomes. This process comes about only through cooperative planning and work, and unless the curriculum bulletins allow this freedom, how can they be helpful to teachers?

#### **What Kind of Materials?**

*How much guidance and help should or can be given teachers (in the written plan) on how to select problems cooperatively with children and how to plan a way to solve those problems? Could analyzed records and accounts of actual school experiences that are cooperative living be used to help teachers?*

*Planning Experiences Seen Under the Microscope* (1947), published by Elementary Grade Supervisors and Curriculum Bureau of Baltimore, is the second in a series of pamphlets containing analyzed records of actual classroom experiences of pupil-teacher planning. Teachers in Kansas City, Missouri have written accounts of their experiences in *Cooperative Planning, the Key to Curriculum Development* (1946).

#### **Do Children Live Only at School?**

*According to the course of study, is living at school related and contributive to living at home and in the community*

*or are school activities separate and apart from what happens after school hours?*

*Are there opportunities for the home and community to make living at school richer and more meaningful?*

#### **Are Children's Needs a Point of Departure?**

*Are the suggested materials and resources related to children's interests and are the activities those growing out of their needs?*

A few bulletins discussed briefly some common needs and interests of children of various age levels. Others gave symptoms appearing in child behavior which were indicative of certain needs and interests. Certainly any reliable guidance which may be given teachers on how to observe and interpret child behavior deserves attention.

#### **Who Does the Evaluating?**

*What provisions are made for helping children evaluate their own accomplishments?*

The above list of suggested considerations for those planning and writing courses of study or guides to teaching is by no means exhaustive. It is, however, comprehensive enough to indicate needs of teachers which have not been met by the traditional type of bulletin. Certainly there is not any one pattern we can follow in preparing such materials. There is a need, however, to focus constantly on discovering and recognizing changing needs and problems and trying to find intelligent and cooperative ways of meeting them.

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