

# Child Needs and the Curriculum

WILLARD C. OLSON

If what has been called the experience curriculum is to truly meet the needs of individuals in our modern society, it must be founded on a sound knowledge of how those individuals learn and grow. In this article\* Willard C. Olson, director of research in child development, University of Michigan, points to important facts concerning the growth of children and their implications for the kind of curriculum we plan.

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW of human biology, each child must receive from the environment food, water, air, and shelter. He will engage in behavior appropriate to his stage of maturation in order to secure the necessary conditions. Biological needs also include rest and sleep for growth, repair of tissues, and the conservation of energy. There must be an orderly balance between intake and excretion with retention constituting the materials for growth.

In the early years the child is highly dependent on the mother and the immediate family and thus social relations become instrumental in the satisfaction of the primary biological needs. By and large, it is the derived needs with which the curriculum in school becomes concerned. At no time, however, can the so-called basic needs be ignored with impunity.

If we were dealing with a series of simple cultures in each of which all of the members were highly inbred, we would probably be much impressed with the role of social experiences in making children alike. In schools in most of our American communities, we are dealing with a highly heterogeneous

group of children. Teachers become, in any given community or district of it, very sensitive to wide individual differences in maturation. A common assignment does not seem appropriate for children who vary so much in their rate of growing. The general public and parents, uninformed in these matters, regularly attempt to set "standards" which ignore the variability of the human material, or to legislate a cure for an apparent social need without technical consideration of the process by which children grow.

## Fallacies in "Curriculum Offerings"

After a social need has been located, a frequent step is to introduce formal curriculum content designed to meet that need. One of the first difficulties with this approach is that children learn only their responses and not necessarily the stimuli or assumed stimuli to which they are subjected. Having a given type of content in the curriculum does not necessarily mean, therefore, that any important learning is being accomplished.

In a very real sense, children hear and see with their brains and central nervous systems rather than with their peripheral organs such as the ears and the eyes. This means, of course, that many presumed stimulating situations are actually

\*The materials in this article have been drawn from a book by the writer entitled *Child Development* to be published by D. C. Heath and Company early in 1949.

meaningless from the point of view of perception and learning.

A second fallacy is the assumption that because something is in the curriculum and there seems to be some immediate learning, there will also be substantial retention. A long history of experimentation in the psychology of learning underlines the fact that nonsense material is learned with difficulty and is forgotten quickly.

It is probable that this is one of the reasons why "drives" to build up a given achievement in a school system regularly fail even though there seems to be some immediate responsiveness. This may also be one of the reasons why there is so little relationship between the time allotted and the amount of learning produced in any of the more formal areas of the curriculum. Unfortunately "going through the motions" can give the surface appearance of a constructive program and may be used to disarm reactionary criticism even though the shallowness of the approach is readily demonstrable.

It is true that children attempt to meet cultural requirements if the expected behavior is in their available repertoire of possible responses. If unsuccessful, the usual sequence is that of frustration and aggression, frustration and regression, or the alternative of escape.

Each child who is growing slowly runs the hazard of unreasonable expectancy, some type of punishment, and the probability of disturbed social behavior and its reverberations in the affective and emotional life. Personality tends to be an emergent in the interaction between the individual and the society which sets directions and to which he refers his values.

### Cultural Foundations of Personality

The cultural anthropologists are exploring currently the relationships between child rearing practices in various simple cultures and the characteristics of the adult personality that is formed. The general technique is to get the duration and severity of bladder and bowel training, of weaning, of release from dependency, and of sex training and to relate these to adult characteristics. Similar techniques are being applied to specific sub-groups within our own complex culture. Sufficient is already known to appreciate that occupational, racial, regional, and familial differences exert important influences.

Pediatric, psychologic, and psychiatric considerations have led to the advocacy of respect for self-regulation in bodily functions and to a growth philosophy in matters of discipline and training. This trend is affecting a substantial but unknown percentage of our current population of young parents and their children who represent the growing points of cultural change. In other new homes, both a strict regimen and a coercive philosophy are still the rule.

The teacher in school is thus in a cultural dilemma. Should his practices be congruent with the cultural group or family from which the child comes or should he attempt to move in the direction in which investigations point and which seem hopeful for general improvement? As an instrument of society, it seems probable that schools must assist in generalizing the best that is known and most broadly based as of a given period. The school then courts the danger of becoming culturally discrepant unless linked with programs of pre-

parental, parent, and community education.

What are some of the points of view and methods that appear to be consistent both with the nature of the child and the culture?

### **Practice, Pacing, and Forcing**

While readiness for a new activity is often described as an emergent based upon the maturation of the child, it should be noted that such emergence is accompanied by literally hundreds of hours of practice of the preliminary pattern and components of the coordinated act. Thus the infant in preparing to crawl spends much of his waking time in the exercise of arms and legs, in the tentative assumption of various postures, and in experimentation with different methods of producing forward motion.

While forcing in the sense of premature training is not successful in hastening the coordinated process, it should be noted that self-instigated practice is almost continuous and that a child readily cooperates with an interested adult in extending the range of his repertoire of experimental movements. This cooperation is most evident surrounding the nascent stage of emergence. An adult is simply disappointed if he attempts to establish the behavior at a prior period. If expectancy is in harmony with maturation, the adult has adopted a point of view sometimes described as "pacing."

The healthy child is observing and rehearsing continuously. His control of the environment is confined to the things that he finds in it, and is extended by the provision of new opportunities.

One role of the teacher is to provide new experiences. Under the combined

influence of inner design and practice, the child becomes ready for more and more complex integrations. To assist these broader integrations is another of the important tasks of the teacher. A child tends to engage in any socially approved behavior that is within his capacity for successful response. The teacher gives direction to learning by approving comments indicating what are the socially approved types of behavior. This is another important role of the teacher as an agent of the culture.

The smoothly operating picture described above becomes garbled and confused if a parent or a teacher continually stimulates a child to activity for which he is unready, at which he fails, and for which he receives disapproval. Under a forcing plan the teacher or parent, by urging, scolding, and setting up extrinsic awards, attempts to bring the child up to some pre-conceived standard of excellence. Such methods commonly fail and bring about bad social and emotional repercussions. The only protection from such insult open to a child is to avoid and escape the experience or to fight back so as to remove the discomfort of an impossible situation.

Seeking behavior and self-selection have been demonstrated to give excellent cues as to methods for meeting the needs of individual children in such widely varying areas as infant feeding, elimination, sleeping, reading, spelling, and arithmetic. In a broader and social sense we are concerned with the active participation of the learner in the experiences which he is to incorporate.

### **Child Participation**

A frequent objection to the participation of children in the determination

of their experiences is that their interests will be whimsical. As a matter of fact, they are seldom such and even a modicum of group planning serves to rule out the trivial.

It should be noted that the values of the culture are represented by the prior history of the child in the home, by the continuing relationship with parents, by the physical setting of the school, by the teacher, and by the available supply of instructional materials and experiences in the school and community. There have been repeated demonstrations that new values may be obtained without the sacrifice of basic skills and information. There is no essential conflict between the wise nurture of growth, and the purposes of education as full living in the present, preparation for the future, and community improvement.

How are children to be brought into contact through organized education with those aspects of the culture which are historic and make for stabilization and at the same time to develop an approach to contemporary problems which makes for continuous useful participation in social groups?

If it were possible to establish priorities of interests for young children in general, contemporary life situations would probably be first, future life situations second, and the past would probably be third. Concepts of time tend to develop in young children in the above order. The productive activity of scholars is such as to insure a supply of instructional materials for all three phases.

Only the living, pulsating classroom in operation, however, can be really up-to-date in supplying contemporary life experiences. It is found that wherever

children are allowed to participate in planning, they tend to inject those things which are current in their homes, in the community, and in the world. A real understanding of the present usually requires some study of the past and a forward look. Contemporary problems require for a solution all of the basic tools which schools aspire to nurture in children. If any one doubts this, he should examine the detailed evaluations that have been made in modern and traditional schools.

#### **Evaluation of Differences in Growth**

The modern school is making a definite attempt to extend the range of learning experiences for children. The fundamental hypothesis underlying this attempt is that children learn what they experience. Many of the qualitative differences in school programs can only be appraised on the basis of a description of the extent to which children are engaged in various activities, reasonably related to the outcomes expected.

Thus modern schools tend to keep individual, small group, and total class activity in good balance. They tend to devote a larger percentage of time to physical needs and to manipulative experiences. The more formal and traditional schools place a greater stress on verbal learning. The more modern school maintains an alternation between active and passive occupations while the more formal school requires the children to sit in their seats for a larger fraction of the school day.

Detailed appraisals that have been made with the aid of tests and observational instruments regularly demonstrate a high degree of similarity in those areas of experience that formal and traditional

schools have in common, with substantial differences in those areas in which they do not share to any marked extent. Children in schools with modern practices have been found to excel in honesty, in ability to plan and take the initiative, and in the success with which they translate their knowledge into action and production.

#### Guides to Desirable Experiences

The knowledge of children and of society finds its important tests in the types of curriculum experiences provided by schools and teachers and in the methods for the harmonization of

internal needs and external requirements. Accepting the fact of individual differences, the modern teacher has the task of helping all children to grow.

The full involvement of the learner is a clue to method and one guide to necessary and desirable experiences. A second guide exists in the nature of society and the possibilities of organized knowledge and community resources. Schools that seem to differ markedly on the surface are surprisingly similar in areas of common experience but differ in the qualitative areas in which lie many of the objectives and needs of modern society.

## *Experiences to Meet Goals*

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J. CECIL PARKER

In looking at the question of the place of direct and vicarious experiences in the learning situation, J. Cecil Parker, associate professor of education at the University of California, Berkeley, suggests that the question is not one of either-or. Rather, he maintains, it is that of using both types of experiences in terms of the accomplishment of purposes. Mr. Parker's analysis points clearly toward the essential characteristics of real and effective learning.

STUDENTS LEARN BEST when the experiences they have are interesting and important to them as individuals and members of a group. Sounds simple, doesn't it?

When we dig a little deeper we discover that we really learn when we must—to achieve certain goals and values. Changes in behavior are, without doubt, made in order to accomplish something that the learner thinks important. The extent to which an individual participates in learning experiences planned for him depends primarily

upon the meaningfulness with which he discovers relationships between the learning experiences and his goals that he is sure are significant. In other words, the change in behavior is secondary in import to the realization of his purposes.

This over-simplified statement of the relationship between learning experiences and goals or purposes may well serve as the major clue in making decisions regarding the many problems of what types of experiences to provide in schools for learners. Should the experiences provided be real? Should they be

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