

Curriculum for Slow Learners

A PERENNIAL PROBLEM for school people and for society as a whole is: what is best for our slow learners? The children with retarded mental development contribute an excessive proportion of our teaching headaches and of our juvenile delinquency. Great numbers of these still appear destined to remain permanently institutionalized. Many others continue to drain the economic resources and morale of their relatives. Our professional obligation to "all the children" coupled with our general sense of inadequacy in this area has left us with a deep frustration and a certain feeling of guilt. Our age-old dream has been to work out a curriculum that would brighten these depressing prospects.

We Can Realize Our Goal

This dream seems gradually to be materializing. Here and there over the country schools are trying out programs that offer great hope. Most of them are not strictly experimental in nature and do not establish clear-cut proof. Rather, they are evolutionary in nature, feeling their way pragmatically as they move ahead.

These curriculums can be classified roughly into two categories, the pre-academic and the academic. The former is planned to give appropriate experiences to slow-learning children whose mental ages have not yet reached approximately eight years. The latter carries them to the chronological age at which compulsory attendance is ended and they normally leave school. The over-all purpose is to give them the experiences and skills that will enable them to become independent, self-supporting citizens.

The most clearly described program in the pre-academic level is that at the

Wayne County Training School, Northville, Michigan. In one early study¹ that helped to establish the value of the prolonged pre-academic program, each of fifty-eight children (mean IQ 66.98), enrolled in a new program described below, was paired with a child of the same age and IQ who had been in the institution at an earlier period. The children of the experimental group progressed in mental age more rapidly than those of the control group. They also made rapid academic progress after promotion to the academic level.

Pre-Academic Learning

While the curriculum for this program has continued to evolve and be improved in details, descriptions in April, 1947, issue of the same *Journal* show that the basic elements have remained the same. Any academic drill is deferred until a mental age approaching eight is reached. Meantime, the focus is upon developing competence in three areas: ability to attack a new task with a positive, problem-solving attitude; ability to succeed in required tasks through a command of basic skills; and conformity to acceptable personal and social habits which will enable the children to adjust within their social group. Situations are created in which children who have been unsuccessful in the community now experience repeated successes to the point that they develop confidence. They can face possible failure without emotional disintegration.

¹Melcher, Ruth T., "Developmental Progress in Young Mentally Handicapped Children Who Receive Prolonged Pre-Academic Training," *American Journal of Mental Deficiency*, XLV, pp. 265-273, October, 1940

The basic skills needed are clearly formulated and taught specifically through appropriate group activities. The language habits include language, literature, number, music, and rhythm. Other kinds of skills include such items as sweeping, dusting, scrubbing a floor, making beds, carrying dishes on a tray, pouring liquids from a pitcher, and table setting, as well as those used in sports. As a child improves, he gains in status and general approval.

Personal and social habits are learned in part through clearly understood routines having concrete requirements for lavatory, bathing, eating, etc. Particularly interesting is the use of group voting on each individual's progress as a "Good Helper." Children quickly learn the specific things they can do to obtain the approval of their peers. By the time they are ready for the academic level they have learned many of life's most important knowledges, attitudes, and skills. This program, planned for a twenty-four-hour per day contact with children, has obvious implications for use with similar children in other types of schools.

Earning a Living

At the academic level the focus of leading programs over the country is upon economic and social self-sufficiency. An analysis is made of the community to determine what jobs are available to these people after they have been trained. These job outlets will differ among various rural and urban communities and even between the different sections of a city. When these outlets have been determined, the skills specific to each are taught directly within the schools. During the latter part of their

training the students are employed part-time, and any inadequacies revealed are remedied. Employment representatives work especially with these young people to guide them into appropriate work and to facilitate any needed retraining.

A certain amount of academic learning is essential to them. By delaying formal reading until a mental age of eight, these children are enabled to progress steadily and successfully until they will leave school at the end of compulsory attendance. By this time they have usually reached about a fourth or fifth grade reading ability, their customary ceiling. Some school boards, as in New York City, have recognized the need for those particular children to have assistance continued to an age older than sixteen.

The content of their reading, arithmetic, language development, and other academic skills grows directly out of their occupational experiences. Materials dealing with the jobs they are learning are written for them to read. They learn the arithmetic necessary to handling money—both their own finances as well as money in their jobs. They write the kind of things required by their jobs and their daily living. These children whose chronological and social ages are so far in advance of their mental age are given content which, though simple, is appropriate and interesting to them. They are not fed on the pabulum of primers.

The records as yet are incomplete, but the improvement of morale, the reduction of truancy, the changed attitudes of parents, and the increased number of these young people gainfully employed indicate that these programs are moving in the right direction.

Parents: Unused Allies in Guidance

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- ☐ All teaching personnel would profit by training in the understanding of human relationships, including both children and parents
- ☐ Schools must take the initiative and provide leadership in all those activi-

ties which will help parents gain competence in guidance

- ☐ Greater provision must be made for such specialized services as children and parents need in solving their adjustment problems.

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