One principle has received wide and fervent acceptance: curriculum in general, and the so-called general education or core programs in particular, should meet the social needs of students. Many schools have introduced general education programs in the seventh and ninth grades to meet these needs, and literature abounds in iterations of their importance. Yet, many problems remain to be solved before these programs can become as practical as they should be.

**Problems To Be Solved**

First, for curriculum guidance it is not enough to know that there are general areas such as family relations or peer relations into which children's needs fall. Specific knowledge is necessary on what these needs are and how they manifest themselves in each group of students. Teachers need methods to assess the particular social needs of their students. Otherwise these courses are likely to become stereotyped in content and heedless of the differences among student groups. This danger is suggested in the repetitive emphasis on such topics as familiarity with the physical plant or problems of courtesy in the current general education courses.

Second, social needs are infinite; they range from relatively trivial matters to those that may touch discrepancies in values, aspirations, and understandings crucial to the individual and his orientation to society. Some means are needed to develop criteria for sorting significant from less significant social needs. Some methodology is needed by which hypotheses about social needs can themselves be assessed before curriculum patterns are developed.

Third, in social learning more than in other learnings, schools do not begin with a clean slate. Children are constantly learning a variety of social behavior and social values at home, on the street corner, or from the general environment. To the extent that these learnings are not ideal, the school must supplement or counteract them. To do this, schools need information on what values, behaviors, or aspirations children have already learned and keep on learning outside. Thus, the schools can fit their program to children's needs. Nothing is more disheartening than a well-intended program that fails because its level and expectations are set above or aside from students' levels.

**Research in General Education**

This article describes how one segregated Negro school carried on a research program to make its ninth-grade general education course more realistic. Originally the course covered the usual topics: orientation to the building, personality traits, how to study. When the school became part of the project in Intergroup Education, the project staff and teachers raised several problems. More than half of the students came from broken homes. What about their family relations? The students lacked ambition. Why? The students tended to solve their difficulties by fighting. Were they just violent or did they lack skill in other solutions?

Questions such as these became leads for a series of studies. Each lead suggested others, until during the second year a fairly systematic study was carried out.

**What the Questionnaire Showed**

Through a general questionnaire information was secured on size of home,
number of people in it, and their relationship to the family. Apparently, the average size of family was not excessive, but family units contained many relatives. Living was quite crowded and few students had private bedrooms. The questionnaire was followed by essays on home living on such topics as: What I Like About My Home, What I Would Like to Change About My Home, What I Need and Don’t Have in My Neighborhood, What People Older Than Myself Do I Find It Easy or Difficult to Get Along With.

The students seemed relatively pleased with their human relations at home. Their answers indicated that they found security and understanding although they were aware of and wanted to change the many deficiencies in physical conditions at home and in the neighborhood.

These papers suggested that while the “level of satisfaction” with human relations and emotional factors was high, the expectations these students had of these relations might be quite meager. Papers on “What I Like About Myself and What Other People Like and Dislike About Me” were assigned next to get some clues on this problem. Unselfish, kindly treatment, being easy to get along with, being merciful or helpful were among the most common favorable reasons given. Appearance was a big point, also. Superficial manners, such as saying “Yes ma’am,” not talking back, or not being sassy were considered important in being liked or for liking oneself. Being independent and self-assertive scored heavily among reasons for being disliked by other people.

The tenor of papers indicated that kindly, unselfish ways were treated as generalities and were not seen as specific ways of behaving. Many statements cited the absence of certain qualities as reasons for being liked, such as “I don’t smoke, keep bad company, argue, fight.” It seemed as if the students expected to be “bad” and were glad they weren’t.

Value content of personal relations tended to be limited to generalities, such as being kind; to superficial but specific qualities, such as appearance or specific manners. It seemed the students needed to expand their awareness of what people can find in other people or what they need to consider in their own reactions to others.

The staff had reported fights among the students for what seemed to be slight provocation; gang feuds, and short tempers. There was an impression that gang fights originated among clubs that met in the community centers. Furthermore, it seemed likely that fights flared because of limited skill in dealing with conflicts and a meager pattern for spending leisure time.

These hypotheses prompted three more investigations: a questionnaire on attendance at the six community centers, and the activities in which they participated while there; a checklist of the activities in school, who participated, and how; free response essays on “Where I Think I Have the Worst Luck in Getting Along With People,” “What I Think Is Important in Getting Along With People,” and “What Parents Should Do for Their Children.”

The Community Center questionnaire showed fairly widespread attendance, but the center offered only athletics, games, and dancing, all on a mass scale, all prearranged. There was little in the program to help children to get along, meet group problems, or to organize. School activities left much to be desired in scope and in opportunities to learn skills in getting along with people. The participation of ninth graders in school activities was unusually meager; athletics most popular.

Students Look at Their Parents

Highly revealing were the papers on problems in getting along with people and the expectations they held of their parents and other adults. There were many serious conflicts with parents. Most students were unable to analyze specific factors in conflict situations and to take concrete steps to solve them. They could only recite general maxims such as “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” They depended on surface
behavior to solve or to avoid conflicts, such as "Don't quarrel or argue; obey, be courteous." In conflicts with peers the tendency was "to return in kind"—shout if shouted at, hit back if hit—or to avoid the offending person or situation such as to drop a friend who has criticized one. The parents were viewed as givers of things, advice, help—not as persons who had their own problems, feelings, hurts, and irritations.

These data suggested that the students needed more opportunities for social interaction, opportunities to make decisions together, to explore how other people felt, and to expand their skills in solving interpersonal conflicts. It also seemed evident that the children needed deeper insights into behavior, especially that of their parents and other adults, and its emotional effect on others.

Planning for Specific Needs

Facts and conclusions from these studies became the focussing points for curriculum construction. It was clear that the areas of family relations, peer relations in school, and outside and leisure-time activities were important. The faculty developed units in these three areas, but now they were able to plan specific needs. For example the family relations unit was developed to meet the following needs:

- Children have a limited basis for judging what makes a good home
- Children need to recognize the concept of a family unit
- Many children do not appreciate the difficulties encountered by parents in assuming different roles
- Many children need to develop an understanding of the reasons why family members behave as they do
- Many children need to develop a sense of responsibility toward the family
- Children need to extend their knowledge of family patterns in other countries
- Many children need to understand that the composition and the economic level of a home do not necessarily impair its happiness
- Children need to become aware of the way in which activities of the family as a group may build satisfactory relations.

Instead of the usual study of family, to enable students to gain insights into relationships as well as problems in family life, the following questions became the leads for study:

- What does the home do for us (supports, advises, comforts)?
- Who in the family do these things?
- What are some of the difficulties in doing these things and why?
- How are the responsibilities in the home distributed?
- Have homes and families always been the way they are now? What changes have occurred?
- What kinds of things would families like to do that they cannot, and what are some of the reasons?
- How can families have fun together?

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