

The Curriculum Commentator

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Some Problems Related to the Improvement of Instruction

Each month this column, written by a member of the Association, will be concerned with curriculum development: recent trends, issues, conferences, publications, experimental studies, and learning materials. This month's contributor to "The Curriculum Commentator" is Maurice R. Ahrens, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Battle Creek, Michigan.

THERE IS LITTLE DISAGREEMENT among educators that the purpose of education is to foster, promote, and develop democracy as a way of life. Moreover, there is rather general acceptance that to achieve this major goal, boys and girls must be assisted in changing, developing, and fortifying their behaviors, i.e., attitudes, habits, skills, so that they may grow in the democratic way of living. The most significant problems in education arise from the attempts which are being made to translate these worthy objectives into successful practices. In the area of instruction a struggle is ever present because there is reluctance to modify or abandon traditional practices based upon quite different objectives than those stated above as contrasted with the evident need to develop new approaches, methods, and procedures which promise achievement of the more functional, realistic objectives.

The attainment of the goals of modern education demand deliberate study of the problems involved in translating these goals into desirable practices. Since the problems are numerous, the limitations of space in this column will permit the exploration of only a few pertinent ones.

The Problem Approach

One of the most promising approaches used to help boys and girls change, develop, and fortify their attitudes, habits, skills, and other behaviors is through providing opportunities for them to solve meaningful and significant life problems. In the main, the problems curriculum is

still in the lip-service stage. This is rather evident when one analyzes current literature, instructional guides, and classroom practices. In some instances problems are posed, but the method of solution involves the memorization of the usual subject matter content. Thus, "How to build a strong and healthy body" may be a real problem to children at a certain stage of maturity but its solution does not lie in the study of content-centered physiology. In other cases there is a tendency to make any title or subject a problem. Examples of this may be found in units which have always been taught but which are now called problem units. Such units as "Electricity," "China," "The Atmosphere," and others can hardly be disguised enough to be called problems of concern to children.

Much needs to be done in the identification of problems which are within the experiences of the boys and girls with whom we work. The study made in the Denver Public Schools in identifying the health interest of pupils is one approach. Such information will assist teachers materially. More important is the research which teachers carry on with their pupils. All pupils have problems in health, home and family living, community living, in fact in every area of living. The hope for identifying these problems lies in action research carried on through teacher-teacher, teacher-pupil, and teacher-pupil-parent planning.

Behavior Development

The belief that the primary function of

instruction is that of helping boys and girls acquire and retain information has had an indelible effect upon the thinking and practices of teachers and administrators. The change to teaching for behavior development, change, and fortification will be a long, slow, arduous one. It involves complete reorientation and redirection of thinking and the development of new techniques and methods of teaching. Many teachers who are employing the problems approach and who are desirous of helping pupils develop democratic behaviors are denying these concepts through evaluating classroom experiences in terms of the facts that pupils have acquired and retained. When this is done, the whole idea of behavioral goals becomes unrealistic.

Teachers need a great amount of help in the identification and clarification of behavioral purposes as they relate the specific classroom experiences. They need assistance in methods of teaching for behavior development and in methods and techniques which may be used in the evaluation of growth in behavior.

Cooperative Planning

A problem centered curriculum can never be a static one. It follows, then, that the curriculum in the modern school must be ever changing and the product of a continuous planning process in which all concerned participate.

Traditionally, each teacher has developed his own curriculum or someone has made it for him. Moreover, parents and pupils have had little part in determining classroom experiences. Because of this situation it is understandable that schools all over the country are reporting considerable resistance on the part of teachers, pupils, and parents to spending time in planning the curriculum.

It is important to recognize that in the modern school in which the instructional program is based upon the needs of children, cooperative planning is essential to the development and improvement of the curriculum. Resistance to this significant activity usually can be traced to lack of leadership—leadership in interpreting the

processes involved in planning, in establishing a reason for planning, and in making administrative provisions for effective planning.

Time for Planning

One of the reasons why cooperative planning has not been wholeheartedly accepted by teachers is because time has not been provided for it. Rather, planning has been something extra to be carried on before or after school. This does not mean that teachers are unwilling to give some time to planning outside of school hours. It does mean that if planning is so essential to the development and improvement of instruction, time should be provided during the school day for it.

Many schools are facing this problem realistically. In the Denver schools all secondary teachers are provided a period a day for planning. In Battle Creek the elementary and junior high school day has been shortened so that one hour per day is provided every teacher for planning. In addition, many schools are providing substitute teachers so that regular teachers may plan together as the need arises.

Materials Needs

A large share of the instructional materials available are based upon the subject centered curriculum. Teachers who are teaching problem units are usually hard pressed in trying to gather together enough materials to carry on effective work in solving the problems identified in the planning process. This is due to the fact that there is a paucity of such materials. The lack of adequate materials is one of the most important factors which discourage teachers in their attempt to develop a functional curriculum.

It is important that publishers and other producers of materials be made aware of the need for materials which are based upon the problems and concerns of boys and girls. It is also essential that new kinds of materials based upon modern instructional programs be identified and developed—either commercially or by school systems.

Experimentation

The great hope for the improvement of instruction lies in experimentation. The comparison between changes in social and economic living and in technology and the changes in education is rather odious. The difference in progress can be traced primarily to experimentation. Educators have not dared to experiment—mainly because of fear and inertia.

The present dilemma caused by our attempt to achieve new, more functional goals through using approaches, methods, materials, and content based upon the goals of education of a century ago will not be solved by continuing to make the same mistake which we have been making for many years. Rather, the problems of transition must be faced realistically through continuous experimentation and research directed toward the achievement of currently accepted goals of education.

Since the most effective operational unit for the improvement of instruction is the classroom, every teacher should be involved in an experimental project. If this is to be accomplished teachers will need help—help in the realization of the importance and need for experimentation, in planning research projects, and in methods of evaluation. Here again the importance of the leadership and service of administrators and supervisors is seen as the key to the door of instructional improvement.

Be Sure to Read . . .

The publications mentioned here have been chosen because they should be very helpful to educators who are interested in and concerned about the improvement of instruction.

SECOND EDITION. *The Child and His Curriculum*, by J. Murray Lee and Dorris May Lee (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc. 1950, 710 pp.) Written for teachers interested in the elementary-school-age child and in the elementary curriculum. Part I deals with the goals of elementary education and, unlike most books

on curriculum, several chapters are devoted to developing an understanding of how children grow and learn and how their personalities and interests develop. Part II first develops the unit approach and explores the resources for learning, and then deals with various areas of the curriculum. In the chapters on the curriculum each area is interpreted in its relation to the total program. In each chapter research studies have been presented and their implications made clear. Included is a vast amount of material exemplifying the best classroom practices. This comprehensive, well organized, interestingly written book will be well received by all who are interested in developing a modern elementary school program.

SECONDARY EDUCATION—*Basic Principles and Practices*, by William M. Alexander and Galen Saylor. (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc. 1950, 536 pp.) This book was written for all who work or plan to work in secondary schools. The material presented reflects the authors' concern with the problem of improving secondary education to meet the needs of all adolescents and with the fact that many of the present-day problems may be attributed to the lack of a full understanding of the functions, program, and possibilities of secondary education. The book is comprehensive in its coverage in that almost every phase of a modern secondary program is given rather complete consideration. Administrators, supervisors, and teachers who are attempting to improve the secondary school program as well as those who are preparing young people for secondary teaching will want to use this book to familiarize themselves with the latest and most promising ideas and practices in secondary education.

CURRICULUM PLANNING by Edward A. Krug. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950, 360 pp.) This volume is concerned with practices and procedures used by curriculum planning groups in public school systems at both state and local levels. It deals with educational pur-

poses, the scope and balance of the all-school program, the various instructional fields, the preparation of materials and aids for teaching, and carrying on the teacher-learning situation. It considers the various responsibilities of state and local leadership groups, classroom teachers, the public, and children and youth in school. The wide experience that Mr. Krug has had in curriculum planning is reflected in this book through his realistic approach and the interspersing of practical examples. The book should prove very helpful to all who are involved in curriculum improvement.

WORDS WITH WINGS. An Instructional Guide for Improving English Communication Skills. Prepared by a committee of Denver Public School personnel, Denver, Colorado, 1950. This is an instructional guide designed to assist teachers as they work with junior high pupils in improving English communication. The book is concerned with the skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as they promote interchange of ideas. Primary emphasis is placed on heightening awareness of pupils to the value of their own experiences as rich sources of ideas for expression. The book contains nine chapters, an appendix, bibliography, and index, and is generously illustrated. Available from the Denver Public Schools.

AN ACE BULLETIN. "Helping Children Solve Their Problems," bulletin of the Association for Childhood Education International, 1200 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Washington 5, D. C., 75 cents. This well written and extremely interesting bulletin is introduced by James L. Hymes, Jr. under the title, "Our Fundamental Concerns About Children," and followed by three sections: "To Build Courage and Faith in Themselves"; "To Develop Belongingness"; and "To Keep Alive the Urge to Learn." Each section within a section, of which there are nine, presents a problem, a problem and a solution, a short case study, or a description of a child. This 40-page bulletin measures up to the high standard of ACE publications.

INTERGROUP RELATIONS. A new book from the American Council on Education, written by the staff of the Center for Intergroup Education, The University of Chicago, is *Elementary Curriculum in Intergroup Relations*. (American Council on Education, 744 Jackson Place, Washington 6, D. C., 239 p., \$2.50). It contains descriptions of curriculum plans which make use of the current curriculum context to emphasize intergroup concepts, skills, and attitudes. Case studies give concrete examples of the ways American history, community studies, home and family life relations, and the ways in which life in school help children to acquire habits and skills necessary for good human relations. How these plans were developed through cooperative effort is also described. The authors express the hope that "curriculum-makers and teachers will find the detailed accounts of unusual experiments of practical help."

COLLEGE PROGRAMS in Intergroup Relations: Volume I—A Report by Twenty-Four Colleges Participating in the College Study in Intergroup Relations, 1945-49. (American Council on Education, 744 Jackson Place, Washington 6, D. C., 365 p., \$3.75). The four-year project reported in this first volume is a pioneer attempt to teach techniques for improving intergroup relations in order that the teachers may practice these techniques in their own schools and among their own students. Twenty-four colleges experimented with more than two hundred concrete projects. The results are of great social significance and practical value. Here are poignant human dramas—and here are blueprints for constructing more understanding, more useful, and happier lives.

And Don't Miss . . .

Enjoying Leisure Time, by William C. Menninger, M.D. (Science Research Associates, 228 Wabash Ave., Chicago 4, Ill., pp. 48). Written for pupils. Another booklet in the Life Adjustment series. First list published in February, 1950, issue of *Educational Leadership*.

Your Child's Leisure Time, by Mildred Celia Litton. (New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1949, pp. 52). This booklet is one in a series edited by Ruth Cunningham. Intended for both parents and teachers.

Partners in Education, by Muriel Bown. (Association for Childhood Education International, 1200 Fifteenth St., N.W., Washington 5, D. C., 1950, pp. 36). A guide to the study of home-school relations.

Student Teaching in the Elementary School, by James B. Burr, Lowry W. Harding, and Leland B. Jacobs. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1950, pp. 440). This book is written for student teachers to help them to meet practical problems involved in guiding children in their learning experiences at school.

Public Relations for America's Schools. (American Association of School Administrators, Twenty-Eighth Yearbook, 1201 Sixteenth St., N.W., Washington 6, D. C., 1950, pp. 497). Explores the broad field of school public relations and, although suggestions for approaches and procedures are given, the book deals primarily with purposes, principles, relationships, and values.

GUIDE for Supervising Teachers, prepared by the School of Education, University of Denver, 75 cents (mimeographed). This guide is intended to be of assistance to all persons who are interested in the pre-service professional public school and community experiences of university students who are preparing to teach. In the guide's 24 pages are included: distribution of student teaching experiences, conferences, important experiences for student teachers, evaluation of student teachers, daily and unit planning, textbooks and films, check lists for evaluating student teacher's growth and development, reports

and records, autobiography form, suggestions to supervising teachers of student assistants, and suggested activities for assistants.

To obtain a copy of this worthwhile bulletin, write to the University of Denver, Margery Reed Hall, Room 23.

RESOURCES. The School of librarianship of the University of Denver has recently issued a "Recommended Reading List on the Conservation of Human and Natural Resources" (77 p., 75 cents), to ease the teacher's job in finding appropriate reading matter and audio-visual materials on the elementary, secondary, and adult levels. This annotated bibliography lists books, pamphlets, government documents, magazines, articles, films, slides, filmstrips, radio programs, and recordings for an effective educational program on the conservation and use of human and natural resources. Order from the School of Librarianship, University of Denver, Denver 10.

FOLKWAYS RECORDS. New materials in the field of music are now available also. Folkways Ethnic Library is a project sponsored by Folkways Records and Service Corporation, 117 West 46th Street, New York City, which specializes in the issuance of albums of recordings of native music from Peru, Haiti, Equatorial Africa, and the Sioux and Navajo Indians of North America, to name a few. All recordings are made on location by authorities in their fields, and represent some of the most valuable sources of characteristic rhythms, native instruments, and cross sections of work songs, play songs, love songs, and religious songs of various ethnic groups available today. Children and adults alike find them most fascinating. There is an illustrated manual of background notes which accompanies each album.

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