

# The Curriculum Commentator

Column Editor: Isabel B. Lewis  
Contributor: William H. Bristow

The Curriculum Commentator for this month, William H. Bristow, is director of the Bureau of Curriculum Research of the New York City Board of Education. He raises here a question which is most important, and to which the New York City schools are giving major consideration.

## Curriculum Design

THE world crisis cannot help but be a crisis for children and youth. The urgency of the situation requires that *curriculum design* be subjected to tests of cruciality in meeting the needs of today's children and youth.

Curriculum design furnishes the structure, the pattern, and the matrix for a good program of teaching and learning. One of the clearest pictures of the concerns and needs of children thus far presented is Helen Parkhurst's *Exploring the Child's World* (New York: Appleton-Century-Croft, 1951). Her method was to use the recordings of discussions of problems and situations in the lives of children. A pertinent observation is: ". . . adults . . . frequently overlook the mainstays of a child's life . . . The children call them rights. They include the right of a youngster to speak up for himself; the right to be heard at times which are urgent or upon occasion which he considers important; the right to have his opinions properly evaluated; the right to explain even after an older sibling has just turned in his report on the younger one; the right to objective and patient treatment." (page 259).

The need for a reconsideration of design is further documented in *A Healthy Personality for Every Child: A Digest of the Fact Finding Report* (The Midcentury White House Conference

on Children and Youth, New York: Health Publications Institute, 1951). "More recently, it (the curriculum) has come to be conceived as the sum total of the pupil's experience in the school. This change has resulted from increasing concern with the whole personality and from a new view of learning, by which purposes, feelings, attitudes, ways of life, and personal dedication are seen to be learned as well as subject matter, and by which it is recognized that subject matter is not and cannot be learned without at the same time learning attitudes and ways of life." (page 110).

Some clues as to what this design should be are set forth by Alice Miel in *Continuous Learning* (Bulletin No. 87, Washington: Association for Childhood Education International, 1951). "Continuity in learning is not guaranteed by any plan of scope and sequence designed for numbers of children . . . is not a simple matter of what to take up next in arithmetic or social studies . . . is not guaranteed by any administrative device mechanically applied.

"A most important feature of continuity in learning is relatedness with what goes on inside a child and around him. Learning that is not connected with better living in the real world of today is too costly a luxury for our times." (page 40).

One of the most significant observations as to the nature of effective design was made some time ago by Heuston Peterson. Mr. Peterson had just told the story of the little boy in a progressive school who asked the teacher, "Do we have to do today what we want to do?" As usual, almost everybody laughed. "But," said Mr. Peterson, "for once the laugh is on you. It's easy to do what other people tell you to do. You don't have to think, you don't have to take responsibility, and you don't learn very much except to do what other people tell you to do. *The hard thing is to do what you want to do.* Here you have to plan, to choose, to evaluate, to assume more responsibility, and this is basic to real learning."

This reminded me of an incident in one of the New York City High Schools in connection with experimentation with the core. (*Suggestions for Teaching the Experience Core*, New York: New York City Board of Education, 1951.) A research worker was assigned to go with one girl to every class she attended for three days for the purpose of learning what choices she had. What was learned was an eye opener for the staff of the school; her only choice was between doing what the teacher wanted her to do, and not doing it.

#### Materials As Expression of Design

The materials on teaching and learning are written expression of the conception which supervisors and teachers have of curriculum design. *List of Outstanding Teaching and Learning Materials*, 1948-50 (1951 edition, L. Thomas Hopkins, chairman, Washington: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1951) summarizes trends in materials as follows: "More schools than formerly accept the purpose of personality development of pupils and the conviction that educa-

tion should meet the needs of the learners, yet they indicate no way of achieving this except as an ancillary outcome to the usual subject teaching. A few groups state their philosophy in terms of child development for children and developmental tasks for adolescents but too frequently they try to fit the old materials into these growth needs. In a few instances the reverse is true. The liberal philosophy of previous years is now conservative while the former 3 R type of content is greatly expanded and vitalized.

The widest gap still seems to be in social studies where many writers think that democratic social living can be achieved through traditional subject teaching. Another instance is in arithmetic where the objectives are stated in terms of meaning whereas the content outlines demand the same old meaningless drill." (page ii).

The excellent work which Louis E. Raths and his students have been doing to implement, through teacher training, a different conception of design, is ably summarized in the March, 1951 issue of the *Journal of Educational Sociology*. Says Dr. Raths: ". . . We are in need of movies, recordings, demonstrations, and readings that are closely related to theory, and that can be experimentally tested." (page 432).

It is the belief of your commentator that the question of design is one of top priority. The progressive education movement gave us the spirit, but not necessarily the design, of a good curriculum. Failure to give the problem of design sufficient attention on all levels accounts for many of the problems faced by teachers and supervisors, the frustration of pupils, the questioning of parents. Lack of carefully formulated design, based on established research, makes schools and teachers vulnerable to many attacks.

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