

# *Squaring the Curriculum with Social Realities*

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Today's changing social conditions make it necessary for school people to place new emphasis upon a content that bears most directly upon questions of social direction and individual and social morality. B. Othanel Smith is professor of education, University of Illinois, Urbana.

THE PROPOSITION that the curriculum at any time is determined by the nature of society is self-evident. Of course, this statement fails to include temporal dimension. A society at any given moment always consists largely of cultural deposits from prior periods. Hence the curriculum may, and usually does, reflect the earlier phases of society more than its present status and tendencies. It is for this reason that the curriculum is continually in need of study and reconditioning. Otherwise it tends to become obsolete. A significant task in this connection is that of ascertaining the curriculum changes needed to bring the instructional program into line with sociological facts and theories. It is the purpose of this article to indicate briefly a few of the more important of these changes.

## SOCIAL SPECIALIZATION AND CURRICULUM CHANGES

The fact that society is becoming more and more specialized is of far-reaching importance. Labor is now so highly differentiated that one finds only a few activities carried on entirely by a single individual. Everyone is engaged in some sort of enterprise for which he is responsible only in part. The phy-

sician in the hospital, the teacher in the school, the worker in the factory, and the executive in the office are all alike in this respect. How well anyone is able to perform his duties depends in part upon how well other individuals in the same enterprise have done their job. Moreover, what is done in one enterprise affects the work in others.

It is clear from this brief analysis that the counterpart of specialization is interdependence. To engage in specialized activities is not only to pursue a narrow and isolated course of action, but also to depend upon other individuals for some things and to supply them in ways that they cannot provide for themselves. Each one is thus caught up in a web of social relations over which he has little control and from which he cannot escape.

The specialization of society has three consequences which bear upon curriculum development, and for that matter, the entire school. It separates the individual from the consequences of his acts and thus blinds him to the effects of his decisions; it places each individual in a restricted social position and thus limits his perspectives and interests; it makes thinking along a single line, such as thinking about a

political problem in purely political terms rather than in its relations to economic, educational, and psychological matters, obsolete. The meaning of these consequences is fundamental to any adequate consideration of curriculum changes in both the general and special aspects of education.

### **Consequences of Actions Are Often Remote**

In the first place, the fact that the consequences of actions are often not directly available means that greater emphasis should be placed upon mastery of concepts and theories than has been given to these in the past. This will become clear when it is seen that in a highly differentiated society the actions of individuals and social groups have consequences remote in time and space. In simple community life where everybody does everything and people live in intimate association, each individual can see the effects of his conduct with his own eyes. He can see evidence in the behavior of others of the pain or the joy, the suffering or the happiness wrought by his own conduct. He can therefore mold his actions from moment to moment by the perception of their effects upon others. But in the specialized society of today the results of the actions of individuals, and more typically, groups, may not be apparent until months or even years later, and then at very remote places. This is because of the fact that specialization, and the interdependence bred by it, connects all aspects of society in one loosely knit web.

Now, if one cannot directly observe the consequences of his behavior, he will not know exactly what he has done.

**How then can his conduct be intelligent in the sense of acting in terms of consequences?** The only way in which this can be accomplished is through knowledge of the connections which various economic, political, and social events have within the social system. And this knowledge is of course theoretical since it consists of concepts and their logical relations. Such knowledge, where it exists at all, is to be found in the various social and psychological disciplines. Whether it is studied in subjects or in connection with social issues, or in some other way, is not relevant to this discussion. Regardless of how it is studied, such knowledge is essential to the existence of a free society in its complex period of development. For such a society can operate only if its members act intelligently, and that requires knowledge. No amount of unexamined and untested experience, personal or otherwise, can make up for ignorance of the connections among social factors and events.

### **Social Position Affects Perception**

In the second place, specialization calls for more thorough consideration of the effects of social position upon the way things are perceived and valued. Specialization places each one in a position that limits his view of all the social processes to those directly related to the social position he occupies. Consequently, the teacher tends to view the world from the standpoint of the teacher's position, the farmer from the standpoint of the farmer's, the businessman from the standpoint of the businessman's, and the laborer from the standpoint of the laborer's. And so it goes. In a society that calls for un-

derstanding and cooperation, the social structure tends to build individuals with narrow outlooks and interests.

Yet the schools are committed to the task of developing mutual understanding, broad human interests, and cooperation and sharing in activities. On the side of the school are the fact of social interdependence and the capacity of individuals to take in their imagination the role of others, to see social events through the eyes of others. With these factors in its favor, the school can and must find ways by which individuals can become more adept at entering the perspectives of others, especially those with whom they most strongly disagree, and at using a multiplicity of outlooks in making policies, programs of action, and decisions.

In the third place, since it is no longer possible to separate thought and action in one sphere from that in another, it is necessary to emphasize correlational thinking. For example, when an economic problem is dealt with, it will have to be seen in its relation to political and social forces and events. Since economic policies and decisions affect other aspects of the social system, these must be taken into account if economic thought and action are to be intelligent. The same thing can be said about thought and action in any other sphere.

#### NEED FOR ADEQUATE SOCIAL TECHNIQUES

The specialized and interdependent character of society has made man increasingly dependent upon his fellow man. This means that in the sphere of social action, no matter how small an operation the action calls for, what

anyone can do depends in large degree upon what other persons will permit. This fact is indicated by the extent to which our society is organized into all sorts of groups, committees, and conferences. Perhaps no people were ever so highly organized, in free associations to be sure, as the people in the United States. These social facts indicate the need for appropriate social techniques by which groups of individuals can share freely with one another in the process of arriving at common policies, programs, and decisions. Many of our techniques of working together have been brought over from simpler phases of social development in which preoccupation with physical and biological things was to be found on every hand. The effects of working in social groups with thing-techniques and attitudes are well known. Everyone who has worked in committees where important matters were at stake has noted the tensions of individuals, the extent of which seems to be related to the amount of involvement, on the one hand, and lack of facility in human-relations techniques, on the other. We have been slow to develop appropriate modes of social interaction. The school has an important obligation to develop those ways of social give and take most conducive to the rational solution of problems in which numbers of individuals are and must be involved.

#### KEEPING THE CONTENT UP-TO-DATE

Changing social realities have an important bearing on the validity of ideas. Ideas wear out. They are tools for dealing with man and his environment. As such they are fashioned for a particular time and for particular conditions and

purposes. When the conditions and purposes expire, the ideas shaped to their requirements become obsolete. They must then be reconditioned, or, if the conditions are radically altered, discarded altogether. Failure to do this results in inability to deal with current social realities. No one can deal effectively with the problems and issues of the modern world with worn-out intellectual tools.

Science and technology are altering the conditions of life so rapidly and so fundamentally that ideas, many of them backed up by a long and honored history, become out-dated in a short span of years. Concepts of property, economic and social motivation, and political and national rights and responsibilities, for example, must be reconstructed so as to improve them as tools for dealing with the social realities of our times. Such rebuilding of ideas will require that they be clarified in their historic form. Neither the school nor the broader social process has stressed clear and concise distinctions in meanings in spite of the fact that education, on its intellectual side, is a function of the range, depth, and conciseness of meanings an individual can entertain. For this reason, the public generally, and the school population in particular, have no clear notion of the crucial ideas of our culture. How many of us have any concise understanding of such concepts as civil liberties, private property, economic competition, and sovereignty, to mention only a few crucial concepts? Naturally, one of the first tasks is to understand that which is to be either discarded or rebuilt, else one does not know what he is about. But more than this is required. Among

other things, the instructional process must go into the new conditions thoroughly and realistically and must indicate the possible changes in old ideas, as well as the new notions, which the current circumstances seem to require.

### **Emphasis upon Normative Content Is Needed**

There are two classes of ideas affected by shifting social conditions—descriptive and normative. Descriptive ideas are those which have reference to what the realities have been, are, or will be. They have no direct reference to what ought to be, but rather to what is, has been, or may be. The concepts of private property, social motivation, and the like, are descriptive. They are valid only so long as what they stand for or point to conforms to reality. Normative ideas are those which symbolize what is desirable, what should be worked for, maintained, or brought into existence. Such concepts as equality, freedom, and rights are examples of normative ideas. They are standards or criteria by which actions are judged to be good or bad, progressive or reactionary, desirable or undesirable, beautiful or ugly, and so on.

Changes in the material basis of life now require reconsideration of both normative and descriptive ideas. Yet the curriculum, even in its newest phases, continues to ignore these ideas and especially the normative ones. This is not to say that such ideas are absent from the curriculum. Of course, they are there in one form or another, but the point is that they are not there as objects of study, criticism, and reconstruction.

If the sociological facts of today are taken seriously, the teaching profession will place a new and vigorous emphasis upon normative content. This content bears most directly upon questions of social direction and individual and social morality. In a time

of widespread confusion and uncertainty as to the direction in which to move—a condition rooted in shifting social realities—the school cannot afford to ignore the content upon which the clarification of social directions ultimately depends.

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## *Redefining the Tasks of Education*

WILLARD C. OLSON

**Adjustment to differences in the rate and level of growth of children is our time's most pressing challenge to schools. Willard C. Olson is director of research in child development, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.**

HISTORICALLY, education had an important task in bringing to children everywhere some of the opportunities for learning possessed by only a relatively small segment of the population. The emphasis was on mass techniques and a detailed technology of process remained to be developed.

The first emphasis was on the materials of instruction and on the methods that would be effective in assisting the children to learn these materials. In a sense, children were thought of as standardized responding instruments who could be exposed to the same experiences with an expectancy that skill in teaching and diligence on the part of the child would produce the expected attainment.

Teachers have, of course, always been aware of the existence of differences in children. The widespread application of tests during World War I dramatized the problem of individual differences. In the numerous surveys and in

the individual uses of tests which followed, there was a hope that some refinement of method or artistry in the supply of experiences would obliterate the individual differences that were found. Many plans for grouping for special drill and for remedial work grew out of this hypothesis concerning the nature of the difficulty. There was much talk of bringing a class or an individual "up to the norm."

### **Individual Differences Are Designs for Growing**

As we move into the second half of the 20th century, it becomes abundantly clear that individual differences in children are lawful expressions of designs for growing and that there is at present no known possibility of obliterating these designs. In fact, there is a real probability that there are dangers in radical attempts to do so. Teachers everywhere, in varying degrees, depending upon the recency of

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