

Letters from Abroad

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Educationally, South Australia is in certain ways the most advanced of Australia's six states. Geographically, it is huge, about half again as large as Texas. Its capital, Adelaide, on the south coast, is its only large city, and it is there that all its teachers are trained. A group of forward looking educators in Adelaide are responsible for the remarkably fine program in the elementary schools and good signs of progress in the secondary schools. Among this group, Miss Mavis Wauchope (pronounced Walk-up), head of the training school of the Teachers College, is the one who puts theory into practice and develops ideas by actual experimentation. An excellent sample of her work is given in the following article.

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A South Australian Experiment in Individual Progression

SOUTH AUSTRALIA has for some years been facing an acute shortage of teachers, and the size of classes has been considerably increased. Research has shown that the larger the number in a class the wider the range of individual differences and the greater the need for teachers to take these individual differences into practical account.

In August 1949, an Education Enquiry Committee, set up by the Government of South Australia, published its final report after more than five years of patient enquiry and investigation. The report was a fine piece of work, and the arguments in favour of individual progression are so fittingly summarised that one feels justified in quoting from it:

"We have therefore been forced to conclude that the division of the school life of children into annual work-stages is but a rough and ready expedient adopted at a time when there was little exact knowledge of individual variation. So long as school work in the various subjects is divided into annual blocks, taught by the method of class instruction, and tested by a

'catastrophic' final examination, the problems of grading and promoting will never be satisfactorily solved. There is but one sound principle—the progressive adaptation of the whole educative process to each growing child. In our view that requires the adoption of the principle of progression at individual rates. We mean by this far more than the giving of individual attention to 'backward' children with the aim of keeping them moving in the common stream. We mean that the attempt to keep children so moving must be abandoned. No teacher, however great his skill and effort, has ever succeeded in keeping all the children of a class at the same rate of advancement. The attempt to do so, when it was vigorously carried out, cast a dark shadow over the lives of many children and their teachers. It hindered the more able children, and harassed the less able. We recommend a thorough-going adoption of the principle of individual progression.

"What we have said does not conflict with the view that in certain subjects the children must pass through a

more or less common curriculum. In the study of arithmetic, for example, the child must acquire a systematic body of knowledge and an orderly series of skills. But his acquisition of these is soundest when he knows at each step what he is about, and so moves, not from the ungrasped to the unknowable, but from what he knows to what he can master. In short, he must proceed at his own best pace.

"Far from causing a lowering of standards and a relaxation of effort, the wise adoption of the principle of individual progression in what are called the 'skill' subjects will ensure more work of the best kind. But it will make more exacting demands upon the teacher. He must know the capacities of his children more precisely, and make himself aware of their difficulties much more intimately than has been the case. It will be necessary to prepare subject matter by assignments of such a kind that the children, as far as possible, work by themselves and correct their own work."¹

The Committee made certain recommendations that would assist the practical implementation of these findings. Recommendation 4 reads: "That written assignments of work with explanations, examples, problems, and provision for checking the child's work be obtained or prepared." And Recommendation 5 states: "That for the purpose of the system of individual progression, teachers be trained in assessing individual capacity, and in methods of ascertaining readiness of children for specific tasks, use of diagnostic tests and use of standardised tests of attainment."

Some members of the staff of Adelaide Teachers' College found them-

¹ Report of the Education Enquiry Committee, South Australia. Published by the Government Printer, South Australia. 1949. Page 5.

selves wholeheartedly in agreement with the findings of the Committee, and decided to try to implement them. The first step was the setting up of an experimental group in each of two Practising Schools. In one Infant Department a class of 50 beginners was introduced to individual progression methods right from the start; in the other Practising School a composite class of children from Grades I, II and III was set up and individual progression was introduced, while a similar composite class was used as a control class and taught in the traditional way. At the end of the year it was found that the children in the experimental class had not only outstripped the children in the control class in academic attainments, but a test carried out by the Psychological Department revealed that they showed greater resourcefulness, self-confidence and independence. As a result a second class working on individual progression lines was planned for the ensuing year.

Gradually the scheme was extended, until in 1952 one Infant Practising School was working wholly on individual lines, and there were individual progression groups in two other Practising Schools, thus enabling all students training for Infant work and most of the students training for Primary work to spend at least one of their periods of consecutive teaching practice with an individual progression group.

Recommendations 4 and 5 of the Education Enquiry Committee's report were also heeded. A small subcommittee prepared units of work in the basic skill subjects to cover the course as set down for Grades I, II and III, together with the necessary practice and testing material. The cost of publication was so high that it was

deemed advisable to reproduce the material by the Gestefilm process, and to have it published in printed form at a later date when the demand for it had increased. Some work has been done in preparing material for the other Primary School levels, but it has not yet been completed. In planning the units of work we received a great deal of help from Dr. Carleton Washburne's description of the method of planning adopted in Winnetka, and set forth in *Adjusting the School to the Child* (published by the World Book Company). We found it advisable to provide each child in the Lower Primary grades with two record cards—one for Number, and the other for Reading and Spelling. The children keep their own records of work done, using a rainbow system of grading and recording that is very simple and adds greatly to the attractiveness of the record card.

Recommendation 5 has also been carried out to some extent. Students in training are given opportunities of assessing individual capacities and are able to apply readiness tests and standardised tests of attainment. In some districts the district inspector has arranged Regional Conferences at which the principles underlying individual progression have been introduced and discussed. The New Education Fellowship has organised a series of week-end conferences for those teachers in the field who are interested in introducing individual methods into their schools. Experiences are exchanged, methods evaluated and developments discussed, with apparent success.

In 1951 Teachers' College organized a "workshop week-end" for students about to take up their first appointments. Teachers who had adopted individual methods discussed the advantages and disadvantages, and several district inspectors sketched the develop-

ment of individual progression ideas in their own inspectorial districts. The students saw the units of work arranged in sequence, and were able to handle and discuss them. Each outgoing student took with him a complete set of units of work to the end of the Grade III curriculum, and a rough outline of the way the work was developing in the higher grades. Individual progression work seems eminently suited to the needs of the small rural schools, and it is interesting to note the large number of head teachers of such schools who write in to Teachers' College for material and information as to the best method of using it. Requests are now coming in from teachers in the other States, asking for material and the best way of introducing the scheme.

But before individual work can be attempted at all with any promise of success there are four prerequisite conditions that must be observed, viz:

(1) An adequate amount of varied and carefully graded material that is self-instructive and self-corrective must be available to put into the children's hands just when it is needed.

(2) A sufficient number of carefully graded diagnostic tests must have been prepared beforehand.

(3) The teacher must have done a fair amount of reading on the subject.

(4) The teacher should have done a good deal of serious thinking about the subject, should have observed carefully, and have tried to realise the significance of his observations.

But our experience has been that those who are prepared to enter into the spirit of the scheme wholeheartedly will find a decrease of strain and tension, and teaching for them will become a joyous and enriching adventure.—*Mavis Wauchope*, head, Training School, Teachers' College, Adelaide, Australia.

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