

What Shall We Teach?

TO DEVOTE a journal issue to consideration of the content of the instructional program in schools is to venture into an area that is at present subjected to a most penetrating fire of criticism. Broad questions of far-reaching significance are now being raised concerning the school curriculum, an area directly related to each of us, whether we be pupil, parent, citizen or professional person working in schools.

Yet through criticism we learn; through basic questioning we refine our purposes, improve our ways of arriving at decisions, rethink our objectives, resurvey our resources and resume, with clearer vision and strengthened resolve, our progress toward agreed-upon goals.

What are we as school people learning through today's extensive re-examination of the "content" of the instructional program in schools? We are becoming increasingly skilled in looking at the total school program. We are seeing this program with new perspective, with fuller appreciation for ways of working which enable special areas and special resources to make their rich contribution to the growth of children and youth.

We are also becoming increasingly aware of the nature of recent criticisms which have been directed toward the instructional program. Several extensive critical statements have appeared, each of which has exhibited at least one of the following shortcomings:

a. The critical statements seem based upon a limited concept of the purposes of an education which in a democratic society must be for all the children of all the people. This limited

concept implies that education is to consist solely of "intellectual development"; or that it is to develop a strictly academic "liberal arts" background; or that the school at all levels and for all children and youth should be a kind of debating society for the examination, not necessarily in a context of empirical reality, of ideas from the past.

Such a narrow view does not, in the opinion of many thinking people today, seem to project an adequate concept of education for the modern world. In our defensive concern with "fundamental skills," we must not deceive ourselves that mere literacy, without other processes, values and understandings, is adequate for successful democratic living in the uncertain world of today or tomorrow.

b. The criticisms show little acquaintance with, or respect for, modern scientific findings in such areas as mental hygiene, experimental medicine, sociology, social psychology, anthropology, group dynamics or human growth and development. Without some shared knowledge of the extensive nature of these findings, the critic and the school person today cannot easily reach common understanding and agreement as to desired objectives and as to appropriate methods.

Such disparity in viewpoints may exist, for example, when a modern educator is confronted with a critic's strident demand that the schools' program should be geared to the medieval processes of the Scholastics, or set up in terms of an outmoded faculty psychology.

c. Several of the recent criticisms of the instructional program in schools seem to infer that today's content is not

meeting the needs of today's adult world or of today's society. Today's children, these criticisms imply, should have the education that adults need for meeting the needs of their adult world or that today's society needs for solving its current social problems.

The fallacy of this position has been effectively indicated by a noted anthropologist, who says, ". . . we need from the teacher who has relied on teaching how a tried method can be used on new material, a totally new kind of teaching—a teaching of a readiness to use *unknown* ways to solve unknown problems. We are facing a world which this adult generation is unable to grasp, to manage, to plan for. . . . We need to teach our students how to think, when you don't know what method to use, about a problem which is not yet formulated."¹

We Shall Teach . . .

In today's world, where power is centralized and where change can be almost inconceivably abrupt and final, an inadequate, distorted or outgrown conception of learning and teaching may have serious consequences. For our schools we must have a full and sufficient basic philosophy that rests firmly upon evidence of successful practice. If school people are to do more than defend a position—that is, if they are to give dependable and inspiring guidance in instructional areas—they must know and be able to state simply their own ideas of the purposes of education, of what they should teach—and why.

What, then, shall we teach?

a. We shall teach what *the people*—not one small, vocal, organized, determined part, but what *all* the people, including school people, affected by the program, working together in an atmos-

phere of enlightenment and freedom—decide shall be taught.

b. We shall teach the experimental process, use of the method of intelligence, as the method best suited, because of its self-corrective qualities, to preservation and enhancement of our democratic society.

c. We shall teach effective use of and respect for all areas of knowledge and all resources—whether these be persons or whether these be materials, processes, understandings, inventions, concepts or other elements of the cultural heritage.

d. We shall teach the nature of the human organism, how it develops, how it learns selfhood, how it relates itself constructively to other persons in its immediate and in a wider environment.

e. We shall teach the individual to make full and effective use of those learnings which he can accept, select and organize within his own experience as he attempts to meet his own needs and those of his society.

f. We shall teach children and youth to cherish and use, as they participate in real living, the values and ideals that will help them more fully to realize selfhood through service, that will give them the incentive and the courage to seek and use new ways to solve the yet unknown problems of the world which they must inherit.

This issue of *Educational Leadership* touches upon some elements of the instructional program. Of course, not all areas of knowledge, not all understandings or concepts could be mentioned, yet those which are indicated may serve as witness to the variety and richness of the range of resources available to the teacher for use in the arduous, creative and ever-challenging task of teaching.

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¹Margaret Mead, *The School in American Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951. p. 40-41.

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