

CROWDING—*What Are the Issues?*

Today's schools face critical problems because of overcrowding. The effectiveness and even the survival of the schools are at stake as decisions are made for meeting this crisis.

WHILE AMERICA'S educators are holding meetings all over the country trying to find ways to provide more adequately for the rising tide of students, the American people are passively accepting decisions that in many cases mean reduced educational opportunities and school programs of inferior quality. The hard earned gains in education that have been made over the past 50 years are being threatened—not because educators are selling out, but because they are faced with decisions which at the present they cannot resolve in favor of children and youth.

We ought not be too critical of these decisions as long as we are confident that they are being made only after all possible alternatives have been investigated and then in the best interests of children. But when a community turns to garages, chicken coops and church basements for space and to teachers with less than minimum educational requirements for a state certificate to guide the educational programs of the children, it behooves one to examine critically just what is at stake when such decisions are being

considered. Using a church basement for an overflow of elementary school children may be the best possible way of handling the situation temporarily. But in terms of what we know about an effective learning environment for children a good classroom built for that purpose is a much better place for providing such a setting.

Critical Issues

This brings me to the first of a series of issues or problems I would like to raise in connection with these crowded school situations. It is not the purpose of this discussion to propose solutions to these problems, but to point up some of the critical issues that are involved.

Temporary—How Long?

When do "temporary" thinking and planning cease and "permanent" or long term planning begin? Are some communities finding that their present situations are due to a lack of long term planning that should have been supported by continuing surveys and studies dating back to 1941? Is it at all possible that many of the temporary arrangements being set up now will take on an aura of adequacy and become more or less permanent? What

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implications have we gleaned from our present situation that we should heed in planning for the future?

Large Groups—or Double Sessions?

I talked with a suburban superintendent just a short time ago. He had been faced directly with the problem, "Shall we increase the size of our class groups or shall we organize the school for double sessions?" He chose double sessions. I am certain he studied the various questions and issues involved with both his community and his staff. Which is better for the child—a full day in a crowded class situation or a shorter period in a more favorable class group? Are time and space the only factors to consider in a case like this? How about the teacher? The children? Does it make a difference whether the children are at the junior high level or in the primary years? If the shortened day is used what will be the goals of education? Will any modification be necessary? Is the necessary financial support available? Which will the taxpayers choose? Who really pays the price?

It is quite obvious from the above questions that the decision of crowded rooms or double sessions is merely a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils. However, I'm quite sure many superintendents have been forced to do exactly that.

Large Groups or Quality Teaching?

The issues here may be somewhat controversial since all are not agreed as to what constitutes good teaching. Where lecturing is considered appropriate, the size of the group would have less significance than it would if we

were to consider other roles or functions of the teacher. Is it necessary for a teacher to know his students well? Are working with parents and having parent conferences important in the teaching-learning process? Can these values be retained if a teacher has 30, 40 or more children in his group? Can he provide for individual differences and give individual help to students? Is it more difficult to give large groups firsthand experiences such as those obtained through field trips, laboratory experiments, and demonstrations? Is it possible to "make up" time lost to children due to overcrowding or shortened school days? Some significant propositions that apply here are taken from research studies made at the University of Chicago.¹

1. That the teacher's behavior in a large measure determines the quality of emotional conditions in the classroom.

2. That learning certain social attitudes and human relations principles is affected by teacher-pupil interaction.

3. That teacher-pupil interaction patterns may affect the student at deep (i.e., subconscious) levels.

4. That pupil-pupil interaction (e.g., status roles) can be influenced by teacher-pupil interaction.

With these propositions in mind we might well ask: How do large or crowded classes affect the attitudes and behavior of teachers? What effect, if any, do crowded conditions have on teacher-pupil and pupil-pupil interaction? Does teaching large classes over a period of

¹ Herbert A. Thelen, *et al.* "Experimental Research Toward a Theory of Instruction," *Journal of Educational Research*, October 1951, 45: 89-93.

time cause maladjustments in teachers? Does it affect the amount of teacher domination? Though there are numerous facets to this problem it seems necessary to explore carefully this possible relationship between class size and teacher attitude and appropriate method. Can we maintain a high quality of educational experience in the classroom in the face of rising enrollments, teacher shortage and lagging programs of building construction?

Large Groups—and Child Development

After a very careful analysis of the literature and research on class size, John Goodlad indicates² that class-size research to date has dealt with such factors as achievement in subject fields measurable by standardized tests, attention, discipline, self-reliance, attitudes, individual participation and work habits. We can probably agree that no one of these pupil factors has been measured adequately under sufficiently controlled and extensive studies to provide a sound basis for decisions on class size.

Yet we see from day to day types of behavior in large class groups that would cause us to raise some questions. Does the stimulation of the large group cause or add to the emotional tenseness of individual children? Does the large group situation, as compared to the smaller group, create an emotional climate in the room in which it is difficult to carry on group planning and reflective thinking? Can children in large groups work out satisfactory relationships with their peers that will

² John I. Goodlad. "Room to Live and Learn," *Childhood Education*. Vol. 30, No. 8, April 1954.

promote desirable growth? Can certain negative behavior patterns in children be caused by crowded room situations? Though we may not have sufficient evidence to resolve such questions as these it is being suggested that the relationship between class size and such factors as these is potentially significant.

Crowded Schools—a New Challenge

Crowded schools and double sessions are not conditions we are looking forward to in the future. They are with us now. How will we meet the new demands on our educational organization? Can we continue to work for the same objectives in education or must we establish new goals and new objectives? In the shortened day of the double session what shall we try to achieve? What shall the curriculum be like? In working with large groups what methods shall we use? If necessity is the mother of invention then we certainly may expect some new inventions in the next ten years, for the need is already here.

Who will teach our children? It is not enough to ask who they will be or where they will come from—but how shall they be educated? Should they be prepared with the methods and techniques of working with groups of forty? What new approaches to teaching have we yet to explore that might offer some promise of meeting these crowded situations? In the words of Agnes Snyder:³

"What will be the effect a decade

³ Agnes Snyder. "Our Crowded Schools—Today and Yesterday," *Childhood Education*, April 1954.

from now on our whole social structure as this generation of children becomes adult—a generation with fewer hours of school, a curriculum rapidly losing its enriching elements, a depleted teaching staff of decreasing professional preparation? We ask ourselves, in particular, how much the individual attention given to a child by a teacher with little understanding of the principles of

human growth and their application is really worth?"

The American public, the parents of today's children, are in a position to determine whether financial or child development considerations will determine primarily the course that will be pursued in working out these problems. They are looking for guidance. Who will give them this leadership?



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Implementing the Decision

A problem of immediate and far-reaching concern today is that of implementing swiftly and with understanding and justice the recent decision of the U. S. Supreme Court declaring unconstitutional segregation in the public schools.

WHEN THE Supreme Court declared that racially segregated schools are inherently unequal, it made a governmental and administrative problem of what has long been recognized as a major moral and social problem in America. The fact that thirty-one states have no legal barriers to racially integrated schools does not appreciably reduce the impact upon the seventeen southern states in which law as well as custom has approved the practice of segregation. In these states, school people now face the necessity to keep their schools operating on at least their present levels of effectiveness while they implement one of the most funda-

mental and sweeping changes any system of schools has ever known.

As this is written, the Supreme Court has not yet heard the arguments on the questions regarding the type of decree to be handed down. It is consequently impossible to predict what specific shifts or timing will be required by the Court, but it is to be assumed that segregation in public schools having been declared unconstitutional, the practice will have to be abandoned. Because population patterns, social conditions and readiness for change vary so enormously in the affected states, the nature of the transition problem and its solution will also vary equally. This variation occurs not only among the several states but to a considerable extent as well within any given state. Ignorance of what direc-

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