

The Interdisciplinary Approach

Many special areas can contribute effectively to solving today's problems of teaching and learning. Our common concern, no matter what the approach, is how to create a setting that will enable all specialists to devote their finest efforts toward solution of these problems.

FIRST, LET US CLEAR AWAY a little underbrush. The word "interdisciplinary" may have an odd ring to some, may mean nothing to others. "Interdisciplinary" is not in the dictionaries, and arrived in the *Education Index* only in January 1955. There, some sound advice is given. It says "See Interprofessional Cooperation." That's better, so far as meaning goes, although there may be some overtones in the meaning of "interdisciplinary" that are worth exploring by people interested in problems of the teaching-learning process.

Old Idea—New Name

The interdisciplinary approach is really an old friend under a new-old name. One of the definitions of "discipline" in the dictionaries is "a branch of instruction or education," and it is labeled archaic. It is small wonder that people have been puzzled. However, if we think of discipline as a branch of instruction, the meaning of interdisciplinary becomes clear. Teachers of small children have always gone back to all of the stores of knowledge available to them in their efforts to help their young charges learn about the world around them. But the stores of

knowledge were smaller, and it was relatively easy for a teacher to combine knowledge for teaching purposes.

As our stores of knowledge—knowledge substantiated by research—have increased, that knowledge has had to be created, classified and put into use by specialists. These specialists, spending years in training and research in their particular fields, have grown apart in their points of view and techniques of working. Each of these specialties not only has its own bodies of knowledge (sometimes overlapping bodies of knowledge claimed by other specialties) but its own vocabulary, its professional impedimenta and techniques, and its professional hierarchy. The school, faced with practical problems like "What shall we teach in the social studies?" or "Why can't Johnny read?" must not only go back to the historian, the sociologist, the anthropologist, the psychologist and others for help; it must also learn to work with them, and to help them learn to work with each other.

In another sense, this interdisciplinary approach is a familiar one, for the commonly accepted approach to curriculum building today is basically interdisciplinary. That is, we agree that

the curriculum is determined by the needs of the learner on the one hand, and by the imperatives of the social order on the other. What is this but the relating of the research of several schools of psychology with the realities of tradition, economics, language patterns, family expectations, law, war and peace? For our teaching interpretations of this world around us, we rely on textbooks, news accounts, radio, television and film interpretations; and upon a whole background battery of seen and unseen historians of many ilks, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, cartographers, geologists, political scientists, zoologists, physicists and other specialists so specialized that even their names are unfamiliar to us. However, even though no teacher is a stranger to the realities of the interdisciplinary approach, that does not lessen the difficulties of marshaling and relating the knowledge and skills of specialists for the improvement of instruction.

The Teacher and the Specialist

In most modern schools, any teacher is surrounded by a battery of specialists who are potential aids to improved teaching. Those specialists may be as close as the same building or school system, or they may be as far away as the state department of education or health, but they exist. In our chart picture of the relation of the teacher to the specialist, we have surrounded

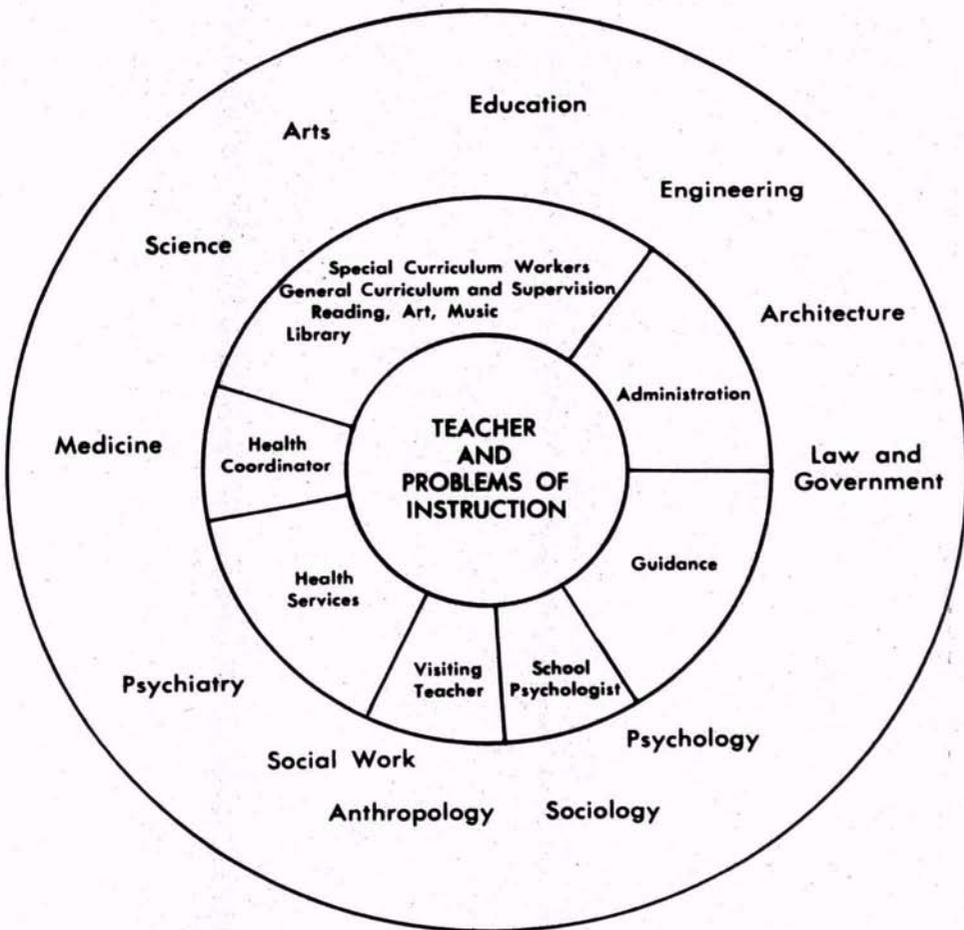
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the teacher with a group of workers with separate professional titles, who are, nevertheless, closely related to the teacher in training and in the immediacy of working with children in a school situation. The guidance specialist, for example, in his training has delved somewhat into psychology and perhaps social work, but he has learned to relate his studies in those fields to education. Similarly, the school or public health nurse has acquired not only the knowledge and skills of her original profession, but has learned to apply these in the educational setting. The same is true of any curricular specialist, such as the artist or the musician, who has learned to serve as a resource to teachers. These professional workers we have thought of as "general specialists." In solving instructional problems, they form the first line of assistance to teachers.

In the outer ring we have placed the names of broad areas of knowledge which are major resources for teachers. The professional workers from these fields, both the "general practitioner" and the research specialist, have particular knowledge and skills which relate either to children as human beings or to those things which children must learn. The more specialized the specialist, the more difficult it may be to relate his contribution to that of others and to the immediate problems of instruction.

Problems of Working

We must, at the outset, accept the fact that each profession has a vocabulary, specialized knowledge and techniques, and behavior peculiar to the group, which sets it apart from other



The teacher is surrounded by a group of workers with separate professional titles, but with closely related training and a shared concern for children.

professions. Otherwise, apparently there would not be a profession. The physician has his bag, his "pathology—diagnosis—treatment" jargon, his illegible prescription handwriting, and a whole battery of chemical, electrical and mechanical devices to achieve his purposes. The social worker has usually a psychoanalytical vocabulary, his "case conference" and his control of relief money and living arrangements as tools. It is so with each profession.

Parentetically, the teaching profession has often been reproached by the lay (notice the word) public for its professional jargon. Perhaps studies like L. R. Cummins, "A Cross-Disciplinary View of Counselor Groups" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1952) may help us realize that this accomplishment may be an achievement. Of course, how and when we use our professional vocabulary is another matter.

It would seem that the first step in achieving interprofessional cooperation would be to seek areas of agreement and common vocabularies. We may assume that it will be easier to do this with the group of specialists closest to the teacher. This is probably a good place to start, a good place to practice consciously the skills of pooling knowledge, sharing ideas and planning action. Even here, the practice is not always easy. Take the problem of vocabulary, for instance. As Ruth Kotinsky points out,¹ both teachers and school social workers have been trained in child development but the teacher's background is usually that of levels of expectations at different ages, whereas the social worker has had heavy doses of "dynamics." The two may often be wide apart in basic premises, if not in vocabulary. Similarly psychologists adhering to different schools of thought may use the same words, but mean very different things by them. Or, the general curriculum worker may have something very different in mind than does the music specialist when they plan ways of helping the teacher to work creatively. If we are to utilize the contributions of professional specialists closest to us, we must be sure to work for fundamental understandings and for real, rather than apparent, agreements.

The more specialized the specialist, the further his profession or his research has taken him from schools, the harder we must work to help him achieve these understandings. It is possible to minimize the problems by

¹Ruth Kotinsky, "An Approach to Inter-professional Understanding," *Children*, Vol. I, No. 6, November-December 1954, 203-206.

calling upon people who are likely to understand school problems and to work well together. For example, in the preparation of the 1952 ASCD Yearbook, *Growing Up in An Anxious Age*, which was produced entirely by four interdisciplinary committees, one chairman deliberately chose, in the main, persons who had had experience in group planning, persons whose training would help them to understand school problems. Instead of a pediatrician, she chose a doctor who had added a specialty in public health; instead of a psychiatrist, she chose a psychologist with some psychiatric insights. The social worker had once been a school principal. This group worked effectively and harmoniously toward its deadline task—the production of a section of a book. The single exception was the anthropologist who had not cooperated previously with people from other professions in a "production" job. He sat through one meeting in an apparently fascinated silence and then became "too busy" to attend.

This method of selective choice of experienced and cooperative representatives of other professions has obvious advantages. It has shortcomings, too. Experienced cooperators are not always available. Further, if we are unwilling to risk disagreement with our own practices or points of view, we run the risk of missing also the contributions of others. Another committee for the same yearbook began its task with violent intellectual disagreements, but its members also emerged with a valuable "product," and increased insights.

Other obstacles we must face are separateness and narrowness of train-

ing, interprofessional jealousies, lack of clear definition of the role of the professions or official agencies, and lack of clear channels for getting help and achieving action. Even the ethics of different professions raise problems. What information can a physician share? Can social agencies make their records available to teachers? Not until professional competence and trust are established, that much is clear. Beyond that, we shall have to find our way gradually, through experience.

Finally, it is a fact that some people, as persons, are difficult to work with. Here, too, we shall have to draw upon the contributions from the broad field of mental health and its many specialties for understanding of the behavior of ourselves and others.

Using the Interdisciplinary Approach

There appear to be two main areas in which interdisciplinary cooperation is of most value—those relating to human welfare and those relating to the materials or subject matter of instruction. These two areas correspond roughly to the two poles from which we attempt to derive our curricula, the needs of the learner and the needs of society.

Sometimes the human welfare side of teaching appears to be the first to demand the help of specialists. Most schools have a variant of Gracie. Her parents appear to be "subnormal" in intelligence; they are on relief. Gracie herself is cross-eyed, thin, and dirty. The teacher hopes to help her learn to read, but she cannot confine her attempts to experience charts or to ABC's. Both as a teacher and as a

fellow human-being, she sees the need for special help from a special kind of doctor and a social worker.

Or, Gracie may just as well be an upper-upper whose behavior is so aggressively violent that it is difficult or impossible to keep her in a classroom with other children. Can a psychologist, a psychiatric social-worker, a psychiatrist, or the three of them together help the child, the parents and the teacher gain insights that will make life more bearable for all concerned? *Growing Up in An Anxious Age* has many real stories of such interdisciplinary helps.

Important as these human welfare interdisciplinary contributions are, they should not blind us to the needs that lie squarely within the non-disputed province of the school, that of helping a child or children learn something. Fourth grade Jimmie can't really read. A seventh-grade geography class goes off the bottom of the national rating chart in a geography achievement test. The teachers ask the aid of the curriculum specialist. She, too, needs more specialized information and turns to the psychologist for an individual mental test, looks for health information from the nurse, asks for family background from the visiting teacher or social worker. The group problem requires the services of the same specialists. The teacher and curriculum worker might learn from the sociologist, too, something of the role of community and family expectations in promoting or hindering learning. Do these families earnestly want their children to achieve in the same terms that the school does, or are they more concerned with having all the children



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available to pick strawberries? Sometimes the specialist may contribute directly to the improvement of a learning problem by eye corrections or health improvement, change in home conditions, or increased self-insight. More often, however, the specialist contributes information which helps the teacher to analyze the possible causes and component parts of the problem. She is then better equipped to plan and to evaluate a constructive attack upon the teaching-learning situation.

Another very important area necessitating interdisciplinary cooperation lies in the very subject matter of instruction itself. Whether a teacher teaches "history," "geography" or the "social studies," the necessity and the fact of interdisciplinary cooperation

are with us. In almost any school, children are learning to approach their communities in the analytical fashion of the sociologist. The Indians are still with us, but the anthropologist is evident in the serious treatment of "five Indian civilizations" in a new text. The same series begins its volume on Europe with the story of an archeologist exploring in the Middle East.

Another illustration would be the way in which the study of literature has changed as a part of the interdisciplinary contributions that are an accepted part of our national life. Young people once studied essays by the masters, short stories by the masters, with much emphasis on the category. The literary masters are still in the anthologies, but they tend to be grouped with poetry and prose under

a heading like "Suspense." Page the psychologists and their studies of interest. Short stories are chosen and grouped in such a way that their insights may help young people recognize the universality of their own feelings and problems. A recent biography was reviewed as comprehensive and accurate, but the reviewer commented unfavorably on the fact that the author neglected almost completely the compulsive power drive of the subject. Any literature teacher who uses a modern anthology or reads literary criticism automatically feels the interdisciplinary impact of our times.

The interdisciplinary approach is also widely used in many in-service attempts. For instance, one community holding a Conservation Workshop emphasized the use of local resource people. They utilized the county agricultural extension agent, several local and regional soil conservationists, university professors of geology and geography, and, at the state level, a special-

ist in conservation education, and a "water" geologist. Similarly, the same community, planning a health survey, will use local physicians including the specialties; representatives of local government; state health educators, nutritionists and sanitarians, as well as local educators and citizens. Communities using this approach are not consciously setting out to be "interdisciplinary," but the method excellently illustrates the values of interprofessional cooperation at the action level.

We may look at the problems of instruction as they are personified in one child or in a group of children and we shall need the combined knowledge and services of many specialists in solving them. We may look at the material of instruction as broadly as the elementary teacher must, or we may regard it as narrowly as the specialist also must. In either case, we now have interdisciplinary contributions. Our common problem, no matter what the approach, is how to use these best.



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