

# CURRICULAR ENRICHMENT

## for the Gifted

Are schools today becoming mere factories of mediocrity? This author expresses some personal convictions and sketches a program he believes will remedy the situation.

IN Gainesville, Georgia, the citizens boast that their town is the "broiler" center of the world. Young chickens by the hundreds of thousands are produced annually. At the age of twelve to eighteen (weeks), most of these chickens go to Jesse Jewell's Packing Plant, where they are, indiscriminately and systematically, cleaned up a bit, dressed a bit and, finally, frozen in a form that has them ready for their future service to man.

As a secondary school administrator, I shudder when I drive through Gainesville. Is the enterprising Jesse Jewell the prototype of today's high school principal? Is our system of secondary education that of taking thousands of boys and girls between twelve and eighteen and, "indiscriminately and systematically," cleaning them a bit, dressing them a bit and, finally, trying to freeze them into a mold that, we think, best has them ready for their "future lives of service to mankind"? In short, do our graduates come from our high school plants as dead in individuality as are Jesse Jewell's broilers when they emerge from his plant?

I would like to write these questions off as only the hallucinations of a harassed high school head; but hallu-

cinations have a way, I am told, of starting from fact. It is possible that our determination to give everyone at least a high school education is forcing us toward mass production. It is possible that the sheer abundance of the bumper crop of babies will lead our schools into a further forgetfulness of the individual. It is possible that our necessary absorption in quantity is bringing us to neglect quality.

### Need for Quality Education

These possibilities, however, must not be permitted to develop further, nor even to remain as they now are. And, indeed, there seems to be a concerted effort to convince the people of America of our great need for quality education. This effort found significant expression in Harvard University's *General Education in School and College*—a study which pointed up Alfred North Whitehead's statement, "In the conditions of modern life, the rule is absolute: the race which does not value trained intelligence is doomed." Many voices have been raised to endorse this idea, one of the most force-

---

*William L. Pressly is president of The Westminster Schools, Atlanta, Georgia.*

---

ful of which is that of Gordon Keith Chalmers of Kenyon College, who has stated, "We need strong schools to do strong work, with strong students."

I have heard no one reasonably object to this thesis. On the other hand, I am well aware of the fact that its practical application will run counter to one of the concepts, which is dearest to the hearts of many of our educators. In the past, many school people have felt that any classroom, to be "normal," must contain students who are below the average level of achievement of the class, students who are average, and students who are above average. Obviously, as long as we maintain this viewpoint, there can be little "quality" education for, naturally, the teacher must move at approximately the speed of the middle student in the class.

It is not strange to me that this definition of the "normal" was accepted by many of our educators, for all of us in recent years have, perhaps, been overly anxious to protect the personalities of our students from any kind of disappointment or disillusionment—an anxiety which, may I point out, tends to place the students in the position of being hothouse plants. At the same time, in other areas of life in these United States, such protection and such grouping would be considered quite abnormal.

For instance, most of our schools are enthusiastic about varsity sports; and, without hesitation, permit the coaches to place on the varsity teams those boys or girls who play the game best. The feelings of those students who do not make the varsity are not always seriously considered. Even in our schools which boast of an intramural

sports program, some students get into the play much more than other students. I am not saying that there should not be athletic participation for every student. I am simply saying that some educational philosophers accept the idea of varsity or intramural participation on the part of those best fitted to meet the competition, and further, I am saying that this is an entirely wholesome attitude. Indeed, how can we prepare boys and girls for the "open" competitions within a democracy, if we do not let them experience the joys and sorrows of winning and losing in the competitions of early life?

What is true on the playing field and, may I inject, what is certainly true in all phases of mature life, must also be true in the classrooms, which, we say, prepare boys and girls for "living." The "normal" classroom, then, is one in which students at nearly the same level of intelligence and achievement are pursuing a course of study paced at their own good speed.

As a matter of fact, this concept of the normal classroom is nothing new. Many of our schools have had for years sections of capable students, which they have called, "honors sections." Further, in some of our larger cities in the East, the Boards of Education have long since set aside certain high schools for the accommodation of capable students from all over the city. The Central High School in Philadelphia is an excellent example of this. In the past three or four years, under the impetus given by the Fund for the Advancement of Education of the Ford Foundation, about forty independent and public schools have suc-

cessfully formed and trained sections designed for the capable. These sections tend to be the varsity academic teams, and the natural desire to be on the varsity permeates the school with the idea that it is "smart" to be intelligent.

My own experience has been that a division of the class according to levels of ability and achievement has many good effects, and few adverse effects. Since the division of students is a matter of scheduling a few distinct classes for a part of the day, few are aware of the separation; and those who are in the faster moving sections are usually humble, and so anxious to be accepted by the whole group that they, themselves, play down any feeling of distinction. Those students who are in the average sections seem to be filled with a desire to improve their own standing, and, as a result, the entire academic standard of the school is raised.

Granting that a school decides to commit itself to the policy of dividing its students according to their capabilities (and, of course, such a division would always have to be flexible), the educators will immediately raise the question, "At what age should such divisions be made? I do not feel that there has been enough study of this question for a definite answer to be given at this time. Many schools with which I am familiar begin such a division at the eighth grade or at the first year of high school. There is very good reason for this, because the student's maturity at this time is such that he is able to adjust himself to the reality of his individual situation.

At the same time, it is possible that

such divisions could be made much earlier in a child's development, though I, personally, would not like to disturb an elementary school child's mind with thoughts of life's bringing discriminations on the basis of abilities. I am reminded, however, of the fact that even first grade students learn early which child is capable, and which child lacks capacity. Miss Strang, of Teachers College, Columbia University, recently emphasized this fact in a story she told of a first grade in which the teacher had named her reading groups, "First," "Second," and "Third." Fearing that the students might learn that the "First" group was made up of the best potential readers, the teacher one day changed the names to the "Reds," the "Whites," and the "Blues." One wise little girl quickly said to her, "Miss Jones, we know what you're doing. Why don't you just call us the "Fruits," the "Vegetables," and the "Nuts"?"

Seriously, the capable students from the first grade on should certainly be recognized and be given work commensurate with their abilities. This can be accomplished by an intelligently directed reading program, and by the assignment of individual projects.

If the strong students are given a strong course throughout the secondary school, it is obvious that they are going to be prepared beyond the level of the average student entering college; and immediately the problem of adjusting them into the college program arises. A means of smooth articulation is being sought by several groups today.

In Atlanta we are making a study of institutional cooperation in curricular development. The study is being carried forward by the West-

minster Schools and by Agnes Scott College, Emory University, and Oglethorpe University. The courses for capable students during the eleventh and twelfth years at Westminster, and during the thirteenth and fourteenth years at the college involved, have been designed by committees made up of faculty members from the colleges working with faculty members from the secondary school. There have been five committees in five areas—social studies, science, English, mathematics, and foreign language. The purposes of these committees are two-fold. First, to design a program which will enrich capable students during their high school years, and second, to prepare curricula which, on their entrance to college, will carry immediately those students into the next areas of development.

Briefly, the program as designed offers the student during his high school years the opportunity in mathematics of studying courses based on inductive and deductive reasoning, which carry him through the usual material covered in high school, including analytical geometry and a year of calculus. In foreign languages, the goal is to have the high school graduate able to use another language. In biology, chemistry, and physics, the courses are planned to remove the need for the student to take in college any elementary work in the sciences. In English, the reading is broad, the discussion is thorough and deep, and the student leaves high school reading intelligently and writing well. In the social studies, the aim is to divide between the high school and the college the opportunity to enrich in depth and thoroughness

the student's experience in both aspects of historical material.

There is nothing particularly unique in what is being accomplished at the Westminster Schools. Certainly all of the schools in the Kenyon Plan are working on similar programs, and I am told that other schools over the nation are also experimenting.

If many schools throughout the country adopt this plan, what will be gained? Certainly, the capable student will move forward more rapidly, and perhaps with more thoroughness. As a result, he will find his abilities challenged all the way, thus bringing more inspiration into his school career. On graduating from high school, and on showing good results on the College Boards' Examinations for Advanced Standing, he will be able either to finish his college work in less time, or to enrich his college program by taking a broader variety of courses. I, personally, hope that the colleges will discourage three-year college careers, and will insist, in the same limits of time and cost which we have today, on the student's gaining a broader educational background. Also, the transition from school to college for these students will be more smoothly accomplished, for there will not be the waste of time and effort, which we now have in the too frequent repetition of courses.

In our day, when civilization sorely needs leadership of the first quality in every field of human activity, it is imperative that educators strive to give our capable boys and girls the broadest and deepest training possible. The present program for the enrichment of the capable is a step toward attaining that goal.

Copyright © 1956 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.