

form the ground for action under Principles 3 and 6.

8. *The principle of the Multiplication of Alternatives.* Existing committees, larger groups and the whole constituency shall meet often with specialists and members of other institutions who will describe, recommend or argue for modes of action different from local practice. The receiving audience shall then discuss and argue such suggestions among themselves. This procedure is to be followed, not merely for matters under consideration, but especially for matters which appear to be settled. Such querying of

existing practice shall become as much a regular part of the life of the community as committee work itself.

9. *The principle of Cherished Diversity.* Parallel with Principle 8, pilot experiments in deviant approaches to a problem shall be encouraged. One school of a system, one teacher of a staff, one section of a course, shall be encouraged to undertake deviations of its own devising and to report at the end of each pilot operation on the procedure, success and failure, and reaction to the experiment. Such experimentalism shall become a regular part of the life of the institution.

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The American School and Its Social Context

“With respect to the program of the school, the *effective social emphasis* has tended to be defined in terms of the dominant exigencies of the moment rather more than with the broad vision of a Jefferson.”

IN SEEKING a basis for the school curriculum, many persons in American education have emphasized the learner's experience. Others have stressed the need for a society-oriented curriculum. This issue of *Educational Leadership* has been planned to include a review of these two emphases, the stress on social considerations being assigned to the present article.

In the past the two emphases have tended to be set in opposition. But the school is unavoidably conditioned by the society and culture in which it operates. And the shape of that society is affected in turn by what is done in its schools.

The optimum development of the child, on which the strength of the society depends, requires certain conditions and arrangements rather than others in society. And the health and prosperity of the society, of which the child is a dependent member, also require certain things rather than others in the development of the child. Ascertainment and satisfaction of these requirements, both in specific and in general, are indispensable to sound curriculum planning and development. The focus of the present article is on selected features of the American society and their bearing in planning the program of the American

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schools. To avoid misunderstanding, it is to be understood that this focus reflects the division of labor assigned to this article and is not an attempt to detract from the learner's experience as a point of equally basic importance in curriculum planning.

Historically the emphasis on social considerations in connection with American schools has been a basic feature of the social and political ideals by which Americans have sought to guide themselves. Three aspects of the emphasis in its early history merit note, all of them strongly influenced by the struggle for freedom which gave the United States its beginning as a nation. One of them was the conviction that the most effective safeguard against political tyranny is, as Jefferson put it, "to illuminate, as far as practicable, the minds of the people at large," so that they might participate with intelligence in the management of the affairs of state. A second conviction, also stated by Jefferson, was the belief in the importance of developing "those talents which nature has sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated."¹ Jefferson spoke of this in behalf of the welfare of the nation. He also spoke in behalf of a nation which took the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness of its members as its guiding ideal. The third aspect of the early social emphasis centered on the cultivation of loyalty to the new nation aspiring to be governed by these ideals.

This emphasis on the social role of the school did not, and still does not, want

¹ R. F. Butts, L. A. Cremin. *A History of Education in American Culture*. New York: Henry Holt, 1953, p. 189.

for opposition, particularly when it comes to its translation into practice. Nevertheless it inspired the gradually victorious struggle during the nineteenth century for a nonsectarian school system controlled and supported by the public and open to all the children of the nation regardless of color, creed, parental nationality, or social and economic status. And it continues to animate the struggle for an even more effective and thoroughgoing realization of this system.

But with respect to the program of this school, the *effective* social emphasis has tended to be defined in terms of the dominant exigencies of the moment rather more than with the broad vision of a Jefferson. In the fore part of the nineteenth century, the great bulk of the population consisted of freehold farm families and rural communities. The level of technology was low. Children learned the livelihoods of their fathers through apprenticeship. Loyalty to the American ideals and way of life was picked up through family, church, and neighborhood. And with affairs of state relatively simple and remote and only one white male in seven eligible to vote the need for schooling to help develop an intelligent electorate was not pressing. But there was the traditional Protestant emphasis on reading and interpreting the *Bible* for oneself. Moreover, money was exchanged; there were household accounts to be kept; newspapers were increasingly available; and there were letters to write and to read. These activities depended upon elementary mastery of skills traditionally associated with the school, and the cultivation of this mastery became the program demanded of the elementary school.² Under the circumstances the effective social emphasis fell chiefly on making such a program

² *Ibid.*, p. 213.

more widely available and on eliminating from it those aspects of the European academic tradition which had no obvious bearing for agrarian America.

As the century moved on the United States became an industrial nation. The skills and talents required of the new generations increased in number, variety, and complexity, running beyond the possibility of transmission by apprenticeship. Furthermore, industrialization brought urbanization and separation between children and their fathers' occupations. And while it was reducing and changing family and neighborhood influences, it was increasing the significance of the United States as a nation and world power. Thus the cultivation of vocational talents and skills and the development of loyalty to the American ideals and way of life gradually came to be the pressing needs of society. And it was in these terms that the school program began to be viewed.

First the elementary program was expanded to take some account of the new needs. Then, as this became insufficient, the campaign that had previously been undertaken with respect to the elementary school was extended with increasing vigor to include the secondary school, to make it more widely available and to revise its program in accordance with the new requirements. By the turn of the century this was beginning to mean not only more reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also more advanced mathematics and work in the sciences. The earlier study of manners and conduct (deriving from some sense of the moral ambivalence of technical knowledge and from the school's religious beginnings) had now been displaced by a study of geography and history aimed at developing a sense of patriotism. And the traditional academic stress on text materials

was beginning to be challenged by a growing emphasis on manual, industrial, and commercial training and by the child-centered conceptions advanced by the followers of Pestalozzi and Froebel.³

Dewey was giving sympathetic attention to some of these new emphases. But he was also cautioning against the narrowness of interpretation they were receiving. He argued that activities winning the interests of children and preparing skills useful to industrial society should be treated by the school as means of generating a sense of active community life and an interest in the growing bodies of knowledge engaging adult minds.⁴ In his *Democracy and Education*, published in 1916, he stated the argument again and more fully and stressed the need for cultivating a reconstructive and critical attitude toward various obnoxious features of the American society which the advancing industrialization was accentuating.

But as Americans moved through the first two decades of the twentieth century, the dominant and influential emphasis continued to fall along the narrower lines. The United States was becoming a congeries of corporate enterprises, specialized group interests, and collective undertakings. The nations of the world were increasing their economic interdependence. And social and political problems were taking on tremendous complexity. But American schools were helping to perpetuate the attitudes of laissez-faire individualism and many of the limited outlooks of the earlier agrarian society. In most areas of study on the secondary level the stress was on memory, recall, and recitation of information whose selection and organization largely

³ *Ibid.*, p. 382-83, 388.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 345-46, 384, 484. Cf. also John Dewey, *The School and Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1899, p. 19-44.

avoided most of the major problems of the day. Relief from the tension between the academic tradition and the newer technical and vocational emphases was being sought through the institution of vocational and technical high schools as alternatives to the regular high schools. But little consideration was given to the effect of this move on the problem of developing a people capable of participating in an intelligent management of public affairs in the modern world.

On the elementary level, headway was being made in establishing a child-centered, "activities" curriculum, while studies in the psychology of learning and child development were extending and refining the theory behind this emphasis. But salutary as this headway was in many respects for education, it fitted with relatively little disturbance into the "individualistic" evasion of the many problems connected with the direction in which industrial society was drifting. An interest in anthropology and social theory did exist in connection with the development of basic ideas about education. But this remained rather highly generalized and had little influence on the actual conduct of the schools.

The close of the 1920's brought economic catastrophe. For the time, at least, the complacency toward society was suddenly and intensely disturbed. A number of educational leaders and lay citizens now began arguing that the school should be recognizing social and political problems and sensitizing people to them. It should give pupils experience in social action, and it should be making them aware of the discrepancies between our democratic ideals and our practices. But before these sentiments had done more than win publicity for themselves, the world found itself moving into a war having tremendous proportions in itself,

but which disclosed potentialities for further wars of fantastically destructive dimensions. Such was the manifestation of the power and complexity of the industrial age that had been stealing upon us and of the desperate need that now exists for the social and moral intelligence to manage them.

Social and political problems have occurred wherever men have lived together and are not peculiar to the modern age. What is distinctive about the problems of our time is their great scope and the variety, complexity, and technical character of their ramifications. The situation for which the Tennessee Valley Authority was created is illustrative within our own domestic scene, and the present situation in the Near East provides an illustration on the international level. Problems of this sort are affairs of discord among all manner of specialized activities and occupations involving enormous numbers of people. The world is slowly learning that the reduction of this discord requires its measure of understanding and cooperative participation on the part of the persons entangled in the problems and that herein lies no small part of the difficulty of solution.

The difficulty is both intellectual and moral to an extent unparalleled in prior history. To search out the details of the problems, to develop the conceptions for the direction of the search, and to project plans and methods of solution is the work of extensive inquiry. Since the people who are involved in the problems and who must participate with understanding in the solutions have their own respective occupations and for the most part neither the time nor the particular kinds of training required to carry on such inquiries, this work falls to specialists. Yet to be of avail (and to be tested), the findings must be used by the people

in making decisions and in appraising the work of elected officials. This constitutes a tremendous challenge to the arts and devices of communication. And it calls for people sufficiently appreciative of the need and value of such inquiries to give them support and cooperation and to demand and make competent use of their findings.

On the moral side, this means that specialized occupations must be kept from becoming preoccupations. Ambitions tied to shortsighted objectives and to partial insights into the situations in which they operate carry momentum calling for moral restraint. Customary arrangements which offer some measure of satisfaction also offer resistance to scrutiny. Flexibility of desires and habits is not had without cultivation. Freedom from gullibility and untutored belief is an affair of training and arduous discipline as well as of dissemination of reliable information. Responsibility, intellectual patience, impartiality, open-mindedness, and intellectual integrity and thoroughness are moral as well as intellectual traits, and doubly so when linked with problems of human welfare. Stated in terms of social issues they are also democratic ideals.

An invaluable resource in cultivating some of the needed habits and attitudes lies in organizing the school in such a way as to give the pupils practice in dealing critically and democratically with the social problems arising among themselves in their school activities. And the attitudes may take on wider application if the school is made an extension of the local community life. But these things need also to be treated as means to a more appreciative study of the still wider and more intricate problems of national and international scope.

Indeed some of us are beginning to

suspect that a "problems" curriculum may be indispensable to cultivating the presently needed ability to do critical thinking; that this ability develops under the stimulus of unsettled situations; and that it is an affair of skills, habits, and attitudes of certain kinds rather than others and of the command, function, and organization of specific contents in making appraisals and drawing inferences. But it would seem that the "problems approach" may still be conceived too narrowly, with too little imagination and insight, and with too little attention to planning the *selection* of problems and the study of their relation to one another.

There are problems within the capacities and interests of the pupils, and there are others that are not but which success with the former must enable and induce pupils to tackle later. There are problems of direct practical import and others of a more purely intellectual nature. There are technical problems requiring much systematic, preparatory experience with prior problems, and there are human problems of lesser and wider scope which include the technical ones and give them human significance. There are problems of a research character and others in which securing knowledge is but a phase in reaching ends of other kinds. There are problems bringing the most vexing issues of the day into focus and others calling for acquisition of familiarity with much that is settled in our present life; and behind what is now settled lie situations that were once unsettled. It is perhaps not too much to suggest that at no time in human life has there been greater need for a guided, progressive, and well balanced experience such as pupils might have were we to give more careful attention to developing the potentialities and possibilities of a "problems curriculum."

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