

How Slice the Cake?

“The inquiring thoughts of Dewey, Parker and Kilpatrick all seemed to lead to the psychology that superior learning rests upon the basis of experience and to the philosophic conviction that the individual so educated is best attuned to making a social contribution of genuine import.”

Knowledge is boundless, all your pupils can get but a drop of the ocean. What knowledge shall you present them in the years you have them under your care and guidance? The answers are not far to seek. Your selection can be entirely governed by what each individual pupil needs for his personal development. He needs that knowledge which will enable him best to serve the school and the world. The two answers are one: the needs of the school and the needs of the world are the needs of the individual.¹

FOR DECADES curriculum makers have struggled with the very difficult question treated some 60 years ago in the above statement by Francis Parker. In essence this question is that of how to cut this rich cake of life which contains more and more potential ingredients with the passing years. It can be sliced in spokes from the middle, the child's daily needs and interests filling the center. It can be sliced in bands or squares marked out in advance. Such bands and blocks might represent units of work. Then the cake might be baked in layers signifying sequences of world knowledge—each child to consume a slice of these pre-baked sequences. Ardent protagonists of these and other plans of determining curriculum content and sequences have

¹ Quotation from a talk of Colonel Francis Parker. Cited by William Griffin in *Elementary School Teacher*, Vol. V, 1904, p. 273.

argued and, on occasion, battled over what seems to be the way of presenting “boundless knowledge” to our boys and girls.

Francis Parker lived and worked in a time when rigidity ruled. All work was laid out in advance and in detail. His was a pioneer approach to curriculum making, a new and radical concept of the child's experience as the basic ingredients of this educational confection. Before the turn of the century this was written:

Because the individuality of the children has been held sacred, their self activity in all right directions has been guarded with zealous care. In consequence, these pupils have seen with their own eyes, and heard with their own ears; and the accumulated results of their own observations have formed the basis of their thoughts, which they have expressed in their own way. Thus the minds of these children have been filled with *real things* and not with words.²

Thus Parker attempted to break down the restrictions of learning produced by the traditional rigid curriculum and substitute a curriculum rich in life values and more nearly continuous with the experience of the individual. If his beliefs were correctly revealed in our opening quote, he sought to use the child's needs and experiences as the basis for serving

² Lelia E. Patridge, *The “Quincy Methods,”* p. 625, Kellogg and Company, 1886.

the needs of the world and the individual. He seemed to find no conflict between the two.

Dewey, perhaps, put more clearly the social goals of individual education. In *The Dewey School*, Mayhew and Edwards, teachers, reported:

This meant the planning of a curriculum which was not static in character, but one which ministered constantly to the changing needs and interests of the growing child's experience. It involved careful arrangement of the physical and social set-up of the school and a discriminating search for subject-matter which would fulfill and further the growth of the whole child. It meant study and observation in order that the materials and agencies used to present this subject-matter should be in agreement with the child's changing attitudes and abilities, and would link what was valuable in his past experience to his present and his future. It required experimentation as to classroom methods into the use of this material so that it entered vitally into growth in such a way that control gained by the child in one situation might be carried on into the next, thus insuring continuity of experience, a habit of initiative, and an increasing skill in the use of the experimental method.³

Kilpatrick, too, gave much thought to desirable concepts of curriculum.⁴

The unit element is the unit of life, the experience. But if best growing is to result, the experiences at any time will be a growing that comes connectedly out of the past and leads more and more connectedly into the future. Otherwise the individual experience lacks depth and bearing. Moreover the succession of experiences must not be one-sided in selection but varied and rich as life is varied and rich in its possibilities. The two considerations just urged, will bring definite demands on the teacher in the way of planning and management, but desirably not in the way of prescription in advance as to times or outcomes. To be acceptable

³ Mayhew and Edwards. *The Dewey School*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1936, p. 20.

⁴ William H. Kilpatrick. *Our Educational Task*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1930, p. 116-17.

any experience must as contemplated be the pupil's own.

So we see that curriculum organization has been and still is a stubborn psychological and philosophic problem. But, in general, the inquiring thoughts of Dewey, Parker and Kilpatrick all seemed to lead to the psychology that superior learning rests upon the basis of experience and to the philosophic conviction that the individual so educated is best attuned to making a social contribution of genuine import.

The Experience Approach

How does this problem which our generation of educators inherited appear today? There has been a general and most discouraging retreat from the experience-centered approach. Particularly in the elementary schools the layer cake, layer by layer approach has won out. Textbooks and workbooks in every field of learning now dominate the child's day. Indeed if one were to ask who is teaching our children, honesty would compel us to reply, "Dick and Jane" and their many cousins in the book series. Even the experience charts and homemade story books which used to be popular as adjuncts to the readers or as the precursors of book reading seem to be vanishing in favor of devoted concentration on workbooks and readers. Crayons are no longer potential art media. They serve as instruments for the child to execute the orders in the workbook. If this charge seems unfair and exaggerated, try going about the country as I am privileged to do and visit schools at random. The experience curriculum as Parker and Dewey conceived it is in many places at the vanishing point. True, thousands of

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children are on half-time and third-time programs. Their teachers beg shortage of time as the excuse for narrowing the curriculum to textbook-taught "three R's." But we know, and have known for generations, that the "three R's" learnings come better and remain longer when learned through the child's own experience.

A further problem is that an experience curriculum calls for ingenuity and imagination on the part of children and teacher in order that the day may be filled with rich and rewarding learning experiences. Teachers and children who are accustomed to and secure in the experimental method of building their own curriculums out of their own experiences find it easy to plan for rich and continuous growth in learning. But today, hundreds of teachers are undertrained or untrained in the application of such a concept of education. They are frightened both by their own ineptitude and by the pressures for conformity in learning from the out of school world. Hence they lean upon and become dependent upon the text and workbook. Not only is the curriculum thus shrunk to dry bones, but the vital principle of individual differences is set aside for the rigid objective of having all children keep "up to grade." Indeed many report cards scrupulously inform parents whether the child is reading at or below his "grade level" forgetting that his own individual best growth and development will bring him to his own unique spots on the many avenues of accomplishment.

A third grade child recently showed me the sets of books belonging to her past, present and future. She, with the "best" group, had finished book A, was about to finish book B and the next week would move into book C. The other middle and slow groups would proceed in

the same order through A, B and C but at time intervals of some weeks' difference. I asked her about her ability to read book C and she gladly spun through passages from it. In other words, this lively minded little girl will spend at least several weeks pacing her companions through pages of a book she can already read—feeling satisfaction perhaps only because it is so easy for her compared to the others. Think how the learning abilities of such a child could, instead, be caught up in a series of rich and exciting experiences drawn from the busy life around her!

So we find that slicing the cake of knowledge in layers, textbook-wise is rigid, drab and unsatisfying. How else can the cake be sliced? Well, there are those who study the world, its history, geography, sciences, civic needs, avenues of communication and travel, and build out of this richness the cake that can be cut into chunks and squares or units of study. In the 1920's and '30's the Lincoln School took leadership in developing this type of curriculum organization. This kind of organization had and still has many values. Content was enriched, activities of self-learning were sought after. A sort of continuity in learnings seemed guaranteed. But, in a different way than in the rigid subject matter approach, individual differences were somewhat denied in that all members of a class were supposed to be able to find themselves caught up in the one over-all unit of work. Often this did not prove to be so. And it appeared that the continuity claimed for this approach was an outer continuous structure of blocks of learning rather than the inner continuous growth arising from linking "what was valuable in his past experience to his present and his future." (See earlier quote from *The Dewey School*.)

I remember an experience involving this unit organization in which a high school group chose to work on a unit on crime. The teacher was quite perturbed when a few days later the majority of the group no longer wished to pursue the subject. Having a dedicated belief in the unit of work approach, she found it impossible to yield to the inevitable individual differences in interests and abilities in the group. Folks evaluating the sequence of developments in this class, including the teacher herself, felt that this was not a rich and rewarding curriculum organization.

An Individualized Approach

Now, what of the pattern of slicing the cake from the center and radiating around the hub of the learner's experience? This is the most difficult curriculum conception to put into effective operation but there is little doubt that individual interest, zeal, curiosity, joy in accomplishment as well as potential memory of vital facts and processes are at their peak in a program based on actual experiences. Dean Walter Cook of the University of Minnesota, referring particularly to meeting the needs of individuals, says:

Although deterioration is the rule when factual tests are repeated, it has been shown that tests of problem-solving ability, reading comprehension, the application of principles to new situations, organizing ability, and the interpretation of new data, measure permanent learnings. That is, meaningful structured learnings involving problem-solving and application abilities are relatively permanent. Such learning involves unlimited goals and when the abilities of all members of a group are taxed, individual differences increase during a period of learning.⁵

I gather from this statement, and from

⁵ Dean Walter W. Cook from a speech at the NEA Regional Conference, Minneapolis, April 12, 1954.

others that there is not space to quote, that if learning is to be effective and lasting it must be based on the specific needs of individuals and their specific real experiences. I also infer from the searching studies of all of those quoted above that the experiences from which the curriculum is to ensue are not to be selected accidentally but with regard for the growing powers and expanding environment of the maturing child. The wise teacher will help the student to choose wisely and develop continuities of learning which stretch his mind, expand his interests, deepen his capacities to learn, elevate his tastes, and increase his responsible awareness of the social world in which he lives and enjoys privileges and obligations. Only out of the pursuit of, examination of, and evaluation of life experiences as the basis of curriculum, can such deep and lively outcomes emerge for the individual learner. We are well advised to latch onto the powerful interests and experiences of individuals and use the moving force or the motivation for learning that sparks up when the individual experience and the learning process connect.

I find that this individualized approach to curriculum planning is the most difficult to describe or to illustrate to teachers who want to move in this direction. Sometimes I try to compare it to the use of a free day in a well-adjusted home and family. Each member has his own plans, often self-assigned, for part of the day. Some group activities are agreed upon by all. The day's routine of preparing and eating meals calls for rather regular group activity and reasonable conformity. But even here, individual needs and variations can dictate different behavior. In free time one chooses to listen to music, another to view television, another proceeds to the

sand lot for a ball game, still another reads a book while another does her knitting. In the relaxed home there are these and many other individual interests being pursued yet group needs are respected and provided for. The boy whose talent is best expressed in science is left free to pursue his interests in his basement lab while his brother departs for the pond to practice figure skating.

The school which best epitomized this free pursuit of individual interests blended with high regard for group rights and activities was the Wilson Dam School when it was part of the TVA educational setup. Here individuals moved at their own pace and in their own directions in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. Parents were helped to realize the rich rewards of the quality of learning when it was based on the unique needs of in-

dividual children. They grew to appreciate happiness and ease as the best accompaniments to learning. They saw the fabric of experience, rich experience, fashioned into a tapestry of vivid, lively education. Here each child more nearly lived up to his potential without pressure than in any other school I know.

This curriculum approach calls for faith in the principles of learning; for imagination, daring and courage as well; for rich and varied materials and equipment; and, of supreme importance, good, trustful relations among the members of the school's professional team as well as with the parents. The reward is to see each child growing into well-nigh the best person he can be, groomed with effective learnings to live with inner security ready and able to do his share in building a better world for all.

E. T. McSWAIN

Who Should Guide the Public Schools?

"The participation of lay persons in determining school affairs may be more productive when school people become more active in offering definite recommendations on important school affairs."

THE OPPORTUNITY and responsibility for determining the major objectives, general requirements and financial support of public education reside in the several states with the people and their elected representative body, the State Legislature. The administration and general supervision of the public schools have been delegated by the Legislature to the State Department of Public Instruction and the members of the school board in the various school districts. School boards appoint a superintendent and a staff of professional personnel to

provide educational leadership in preparing and in offering curriculum and instruction which, by professional criteria, promise to best serve the developmental needs of children and youth and also the needs of a democratic society.

The people have the privilege to share indirectly in determining the affairs of the public schools when they elect their representatives to the State Legislature and also the persons who are to serve the community on the local school board. They may make significant contributions for better schools as they accept and per-

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