

Letters to the Editor

Random Lay Thoughts on Curriculum

St. Louis, Missouri
May 1, 1957

Editor, *Educational Leadership*
Dear Sir:

Today there is a restlessness among many laymen caused by the belief that too many of our children are not learning enough in school — are not being challenged to assimilate enough of the huge bulk of available knowledge. Some of this lay opinion is misguided. Yet it seems neither fair nor wise to discount as unjustified a lay restlessness nationwide in scope. A major portion of this restlessness necessarily centers around the unsettled and unsettling question: *What should we expect our children to learn in twelve years of schooling?* Perhaps the lay community is awakened and thoughtful and ready to accept bold, new ideas in answer to this question. In this search the layman must look to the professional educator for leadership.

The fairly thoughtful layman is worried because he senses around him a certain inertia that he believes could be disastrous. Perhaps all of us, professional educator and layman alike have too much the "business as usual" attitude. We seem to think in terms of all out energy expenditure and daring only in time of war. So to use the language of war, the times call for a "crash program." The times demand the national concentration of brains and energy of a Los Alamos project on educational content. We need all of the imagination, vision and courage that we can muster and we need it now!

In the opinion of the layman who is setting down these ideas many of the problems confronting the schools and worrying the lay public today, could be solved by small classroom loads, some kind of ability grouping, and adequate pay for teachers and administrators — together with more flexibility and some revision in offerings of teacher training institutions. Many laymen are trying to help in any way they can be useful in bringing these things about. Yet even if the above were accomplished, the lay restlessness about content and adequate challenge would still remain a basic question worthy of serious consideration.

As the accumulated knowledge increases it seems that we meet the problem of handing this expanding accumulation to the next generation by adding more and more "courses" to our traditional curriculum. We may even "revise" a few courses to take in more information. But what we need to do is to transform, not revise—not add—to transform from grades one through twelve.

A young atomic scientist, the father of three children, said one day: "Our children draw pictures of horses, cows and trees — but the galaxies are very beautiful and none of our children draw pictures of galaxies." Are we really bringing the "galaxies" into the kindergarten? These are now as meaningful a part of our daily world as are the horses, cows and trees—maybe more so than the horses! The world is changing—expanding and contracting at the same time—at such a rapid pace that we can no



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longer speak of a change in "degree." It is a change in "kind." It is truly a "new" world. We need "new" curriculum content—grades one through twelve.

It has been said that in the time of Columbus so few of the people knew how to read that hardly anyone was aware of the fact that Columbus had discovered a new continent and that the world was round. Are we teaching the next generation to "read" our new world—or are we in our own way failing? To point up the difficulties does not excuse us. We must stop defending and begin creating.

Is Knowing "How to Learn" Enough?

Some of us answer that the vast and increasing quantities of information in all fields present an impossible assignment. Content will be outdated so rapidly that there is no point in trying

to absorb it. The best that we can hope to do is to stimulate interest and teach how to learn. When we need any given information, if we know where and how to acquire it, that is sufficient. The experts in a given field will need to know that field, but the great mass of average citizens do not intend to and are not capable of and need not become experts. But is it that easy? Are there not certain things which everyone who is capable of learning (labeled in I.Q. terms or any other such indicator, as being of average intelligence) must know merely in order to be able to function as a citizen in our democratic society of 1960, 70 or 80? Does one not need enough content to understand the society in which one finds oneself and to establish a relationship to it? How does one formulate values on the basis of knowing *how* to acquire information? Pointing to the vast body of knowledge to be assimilated does not excuse us. It rather intensifies the urgency.

If we agree that certain content is required by all who are capable of learning in our society and that this content needs reexamination now, then we should at the same time examine our teaching process to see how it affects content. For example, we speak of a child's being "ready" to learn as if this moment of readiness were a kind of scientific absolute for any given child. This tendency to establish and accept "readiness" limits could effectively stymie a revolutionary change in curriculum content. We acknowledge that a child whose parents have taken him to the library and have encouraged him to take home and read books, is usually "readier" to learn at school than a child who has not had this kind of opportunity. What then is to prevent the possible conclusion that the expectations

and attitudes of the total society toward learning — of the parents, the teachers, and the children — as to what *can* be done will surely influence what is finally done? It would follow then that it might be entirely reasonable to expect the average fifth grade child to learn to understand and to use exponents, by way of example. Perhaps much depends upon our attitudes and their effect upon our capacity to motivate. The school can be severely handicapped by an uncooperative community. But perhaps in this field of expectations the lay community needs stimulus—or possibly is ready and waiting for bold professional leadership and vision.

The selection of a *particular* process can further limit content. A process that establishes cooperative attitudes and teaches democratic procedures is excellent and indispensable but perhaps not all inclusive. To give an extreme example, one cannot sensibly vote on whether 2 and 2 make 4. Here there is no substitute for drill. One more extreme example— if a cooperative project method of studying the geography of India leads each child into specialized avenues, so that one child becomes an expert on Indian elephants, but cannot answer any questions on mountains and rivers and cities of India, then one might conclude that this process has certain things to recommend it, but also certain limitations if content is of importance to educated citizens.

Let us not allow process to become the giant that swallows up content. It should be our servant, not our master.

The classroom teacher must be of nearly heroic stature to survive the semester under today's conditions in many parts of our country. Teaching is an exacting and exhausting job, physically and emotionally. It requires constant

and skilled in-service training just to help the teacher keep abreast with developments in his own discipline. So far we have not devised very effective ways to help him to be well informed in two, three, four or more related disciplines. Yet it is just this kind of knowledge and scope which is vital in the outlining of curriculum content.

In 1893 we had a Committee of Ten who gave leadership in decisions regarding content of high school curriculum. In 1918 another commission distilled the thought on education into Cardinal Principles. Perhaps the time is come again for a new thoughtful committee. It should have on it leaders in thought in the technical sciences, the social sciences, the arts, government, and education — including administrators and classroom teachers. They should sit down together and answer the question: "What should be taught in grades one

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through twelve to help each child answer for himself the question — to quote the ASCD 1956 Yearbook—posed in a novel by Remarque: 'I would like to know how far I am involved in the crimes of the last ten years.' To this one might add the words of James Farrell, ' . . . in a world I never made.'"¹

The suggestions which the new thoughtful committee would make for curriculum content would be just that—suggestions. These then would be examined and discussed in the 48 states and the thousands of school districts by similar committees. And ultimately they would be interpreted by committees of teachers in each school so as to modify and improve them in any way possible

¹ Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. *What Shall the High Schools Teach?* Washington, D. C.: the Association, a department of the National Education Association, 1956. p. 133-34.

so that they would serve not only the needs of our total society, but of the particular community as well.

So far concern with curriculum content has been centered on the child as a potential *citizen* in our democratic society. But this layman believes that a similar case could be made in relation to the need for the individual to be a complete, interested, alert, and possibly even creative human being. Learning how to learn and how to acquire knowledge are important but not enough.

All that has been said of content in regard to the average child is certainly applicable even to a greater degree to the gifted. They need a thorough and revolutionized general education if they are to become wise and responsible leaders in our "new" world.

We have had a national advertising campaign of some eight years' duration

to arouse interest in schools, primarily in the financing problem. We have had a national White House Conference on Education which aroused still wider lay interest which is broad in scope. Who will now take the initiative on a nationwide scale to coordinate the highest quality and most searching and imaginative consideration possible on: *What should we expect the teachable child to learn—grades one through twelve? Or to put it another way: What should be the content of general education in a free society?—Will it be the government, the laymen or the professional educators? The layman seeks the leadership of the professional educator. He wants to work with him in every way possible.*

All of us of average intelligence or above must have some appreciation of the "galaxies" and what they imply for

all of the disciplines. It is merely a question of how it can best be accomplished and how soon. Our Congressmen are elected from among us average people. They and we must wrestle with problems involving nuclear energy and budgetary figures that carry nine and ten zeros after the first digit. If *we* do not have sufficient factual information assimilated to grasp a vision of our universe and our relationship to it—who will do it for us? Will we act in time?

MRS. AARON FISCHER
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"Letters to the Editor" is a continuing feature of the journal. Address correspondence to: Editor, EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Washington 6, D. C.

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PRESENTLY READS—contd.

two representatives for 100 to 174 members

three representatives for 175 to 274 members

four representatives for 275 to 399 members

five representatives for 400 members or over

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PROPOSED NEW READING—contd.

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