

Some Current Proposals and Their Meaning

Proponents of devices such as departmentalization, grouping and acceleration seem to forget that effective teaching and learning depend upon a high degree of interpersonal relationships between a teacher and a child and among the children themselves.

SINCE 1950, universal military conscription, the tensions of the world situation, and the scientific advances of the Russians have brought about the formulation of certain proposals which clearly affect planning for integration and continuity in learning. The anxieties created by these various factors have led to a demand for a "hurry-up" process in education, an insistence that we all become linguists beginning in the kindergarten, a cry for more and better scientists, and an ultimatum to do more for the gifted child.

Such proposals take the form of adding special subjects such as foreign languages or science to the program and thus organizing the elementary school on a departmentalized plan from its simplest form to a dual or multiple track platoon system. Also, suggestions are made for homogeneous grouping and the earlier introduction of advanced work in the lower grades. These plans are presented as "new" and "tremendous strides" in education.

Forgotten is the thought that such proposals often represent a regression to

procedures long discarded because they may be based upon an outmoded philosophy of education, and a mechanistic psychology of the teaching-learning process. If the same situation were to occur in the field of medicine, it would suggest that all medical doctors would turn their backs on the research of recent years and resort to bloodletting as a cure-all for their patients. In many situations where these proposals have been adopted, it is suspect that educators have done so not through conviction built on research but rather through community pressure, not through understanding of the ultimate effect of their practices upon children but rather through ignorance of the history of education and knowledge of how children learn in the light of the best evidence we have today. However, before we examine these proposals a restatement of the terms "integration" and "continuity" may be appropriate.

Objectives in Learning

Integration, from both a psychological and biological approach implies the har-

monious development of the individual in all aspects of his development. As process, it is the means by which the individual organizes his experiences in his own way to preserve his unity of self. We, normally, begin life as a unified, integrated personality. We spend the rest of our lives making every effort to maintain that original integration of self. Energy is directed by the individual to maintain this wholeness of personality, and the organism resists all attempts to thwart this unity of being. So strong is this urge to be an integrated organism that efforts to divert the individual in his striving to remain a unified, integrated being may result in abnormal or irrational behavior. The individual may resort to regressive or even infantile behavior to combat the demands placed upon him which threaten his unity of personality. He may break down completely, having found no "normal" means by which he can be himself. In practical terminology this behavior takes the form of problems in school discipline, drop-outs, inattention, irrational behavior, or "misbehavior."

Continuity in the curriculum means that the individual is able to cope with problems of increasing difficulty more and more on an independent and mature level, that he is able to make more mature decisions, and that he understands the nature of himself and others and thereby develops his own self-image. "The principle of continuity of experience means that each experience both takes something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after."¹ It implies constant movement of the individual to higher levels of action. It

meets the criterion of all education—that it end in action. In fact, continuity, if it means anything for the child, implies a share in the planning, the executing, the evaluation of the educative process through which he is going. Thus, what he studies has meaning for him and enables him to approach more difficult problems on a higher level with greater ease. It means concentrating on problems centered about his needs in the society in which he lives.

Based upon the philosophy of Peirce and Dewey these interpretations gained wide acceptance. The experiments of Lashely, Allee, and others, aided by the interpretations of such men as Hopkins appeared so sound that the organization of the elementary school toward the self-contained classroom became quite apparent. Departmentalization in the elementary school as reported by Otto in 1950 was definitely on the decline. He further states that "A summation of the research evidence leads to the conclusion that no one of the claims made for departmentalization in the elementary school has been substantiated."²

Departmentalization

Departmentalization disregards the fact that the individual is an organic being who cannot be farmed out piecemeal to many persons. He must be seen and reacted to as a whole being if the most effective learning is to occur. The teacher needs to observe and work with the individual in many circumstances and conditions in order that he can determine what materials and experiences the child needs for his fullest development. This is well exemplified in the films, "Skippy and the 3 R's" and "Pas-

¹ John Dewey. *Experience and Education*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938. p. 27.

² Henry Otto. *Encyclopedia of Educational Research*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1950. p. 379-80.

sion for Life." To help the child maintain his essential unity and integration of self the teacher needs to know, not just one, but the many facets of his development. In addition, children learn best as they relate one to the other in the many phases of their development. Relatedness is only obtained as individuals spend extended time with other individuals in a setting in which there is freedom to interact. As the teacher thus works with groups of children over long periods of time she is able to help retain this essential unity of the organism and help children relate most effectively to each other.

One of the most obvious weaknesses of the departmentalized program is the very nature of the schedule itself. Continuity in learning is constantly interrupted, since it is impossible to pursue deep interests that have been developed in the classroom when the passing bell rings and the pupil must be in the next room within 3 or 5 minutes ready to switch his thinking to problems in an entirely different and unrelated field and setting. Impoverishment of the curriculum and the quality of experiences is evident when such rigid patterns of the curriculum are set. If learning is to be a continuous flow of experience, we defeat our very aims in attempting to segment it into specific, unrelated periods of the day under subject matter specialists. Otherwise, the individual is constantly left on a low plane of development which limits his capacity for growth and forms the basis of miseducation. The self-contained classroom appears to offer the more satisfactory answer to meet the criteria of high quality learning experience.

A first prerequisite of effective teaching is for the teacher to know the children quite completely. This is exceedingly

ARTHUR E. HAMALAINEN is principal, Plandome Road School, Manhasset Public Schools, Manhasset, New York.

difficult under a departmentalized program, and impossible where a foreign language or science specialist may meet several hundred children each week for brief intervals of time. As a consequence, the teacher in the departmentalized program finds it very easy to become subject-centered in his teaching rather than being concerned with the uses of the subject to meet the needs of the children with whom he is working. This is certainly obvious in the high school, where departmentalization is most widely practiced. Here the perennial cry of administrators and of parents against the increasing amount of homework is so loud that rebellion is generally imminent. But, the teacher, knowing that in the long run he will be evaluated on the achievement of youngsters in his particular area, gives increasing amounts of homework, while the integration of the individual and the continuity of his development are lost in the process.

Those who advocate the additive process as a method of curriculum improvement point out that the teacher in the self-contained classroom cannot be expected to know all subjects equally well and is thereby tempted to emphasize only the subjects he knows or likes best. It would be unrealistic to assume that each teacher knows all subjects with equal intimacy. It is probably more reasonable to expect the teacher to have more than a superficial, broad background and also a considerable depth of knowledge in the area of human growth and development.

In the self-contained classroom the teacher is thought of as the guide and counselor, the coordinator with the chil-

dren of the experiences most meaningful to them. Because of the length of time he spends with the children he has an opportunity to know individual children in the class and thus better understand their needs. Through diagnostic procedures he is able to provide the experiences necessary for the child to meet these needs. In this way he is in a position to most adequately aid in the integration and continuity of experience for these children. At the time specialists are needed they may be brought into the particular activity the children are facing. To say that the teacher in the self-contained classroom will spend undue time on his own specialty or interest is less a criticism of the program as it is of the supervision or in-service training provided for the teacher of the self-contained classroom.

The teacher in a departmentalized program most often feels two needs: (a) a need to preserve the essential identity of the subject matter, and (b) a need to preserve the subject matter in its logical organization as determined by adults. These two concerns make any attempt at correlation or integration of subjects exceedingly difficult. Even in those cases where integration may be achieved the teachers find that the more completely they have integrated the subject matter the more difficult it is for the child to pull it apart to meet his own needs in this society. The integration of subject matter must be made by the individual himself, in his own way, and no one else can do it for him. Departmentalization, rather than facilitating this for the individual, actually hampers him in his attempts.

Other Proposals

Although the discussion up to this point has concerned itself with depart-

mentalization, there are other current proposals which affect integration and continuity of learning in the elementary school. In the limitations of this article only brief consideration can be given to these suggestions. Among them is the proposal for homogeneous grouping in order to provide more adequately for the talented or gifted child. In considering this proposal one should ask—grouping for what purpose? If the purpose is to meet the needs of the gifted, an examination of those needs reveal they are no different from the needs of every child. If the purpose is higher achievement, the research evidence does not indicate substantially higher achievement in segregated as opposed to unsegregated classes. However, if an objective of the elementary school curriculum is to help children learn to understand and show acceptance of each other, there is much to substantiate the need for heterogeneous grouping. If a major goal is to eliminate unhealthy competition, all children should be grouped together. If we segregate children one from the other and put them in groups more and more alike, we create a tense, unhealthy competition. If they are kept together where there are many differences, a helping atmosphere is created.

Finally the proposal is made that we hurry children through the elementary grades so that they will be prepared to enter high school and colleges at an earlier age than ever before. Suggestions are made that we begin reading in the kindergarten and that the reading readiness period in the first grade be considerably shortened. Other suggestions would have some of the Junior High mathematics brought down to the 5th and 6th grade levels. In consider-

(Continued on page 328)

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Some Current Proposals

(Continued from page 274)

ing these proposals it should be recalled that play is the work of a five-year-old and to expect him to sit for prolonged periods at a desk doing paper and pencil work is contrary to the best that we know about this developmental level of children. It is through play and activity that five year olds are best prepared for the first grade. Consideration should be given, also, to the fact that children learn best that which they can relate to their own experiential background and that which comes within the phenomenological range of the individual. The more the subject matter or activities provided are outside of the individual's ability to integrate and assimilate the material, the more we must resort to artificial devices to stimulate learning. The more closely the materials are related to the individual's own life experi-

ence the less need there is for concern over the factor of motivation.

As the current proposals for integration and continuity are reviewed it seems that many of these are in the form of mechanical devices such as departmentalization, grouping, and acceleration. In general their proponents seem to avoid the real issue, which is that effective teaching is a matter of a high degree of interpersonal relationships between a teacher and a child and among the children themselves. This can only be achieved if we point out to the lay public the necessity of high professional standards for teachers, of small classes, and of adequate materials. The more vigorously we are able to impress upon the patrons of the school that these are the real issues, the more rapidly we will be able to discard, and the less need we will have to resort to mechanical devices to solve our basic problems in education.

Carl R. Rogers

(Continued from page 302)

We are loath to give up the old. The old is bolstered by tradition, authority and respectability; and we ourselves are its product. If we view education, however, as the reconstruction of experience, does not this presume that the individual must do his own reconstructing? He must do it himself, through the reorganization of his deepest self, his values, his attitudes, his very person. What better method is there to engross the individual; to bring him, his ideas, his feelings into communication with others; to break down the barriers that create isolation in a world where for his own mental safety and health, man has to learn to be part of mankind?

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