

Quality Is Next

*We must seek quality
in a way of life
rather than a store of facts.*

AMERICAN education has nearly reached the end of a stage in its progress toward the goal of getting all of the children of all the people into school. It has even succeeded, to a surprising degree, in keeping most of these young people in school until they are 16. We might say the battle of the bulk is over.

The next concern is logically for quality. It must be admitted, however, that there are other factors than this logical one, that "quality is next on the agenda," that are forcing the school to a re-examination of what is being taught and how it is being presented.

The explosion of knowledge and the threat of atomic annihilation relentlessly insist that there be re-evaluation of the subject matter and processes of learning. We must weigh what is old and what is new in terms of what is needed for full and effective living in the twilight of the twentieth century. We are faced with teaching three or four times as much as

we taught a generation ago to children who are still very much children. Despite improvements in health and longevity children come out of molds remarkably similar to the old ones while knowledge continues to expand and deepen. We are also confronted dramatically with our old weakness: man's inhumanity to man has enlarged into world unrest and the ominous threat of total destruction.

In a world of rapid change, the old ways¹ of adding fact upon fact, of teaching subject areas side by side as if they bore no relation to one another, and of transmitting knowledge vertically as Margaret Mead says, "the tried and true by the old, mature, and experienced teacher to the young, immature, and inexperienced pupil" are inadequate. Yet resistance to change, change that is vital for the improvement of quality, is endemic.

¹ Recently the U.S. Office of Health, Education, and Welfare, the Social Science Research Council, and other agencies concerned with school learning have made it clear that responsible research in the future can no longer fragmentize aspects of the process. Research must consider multiple variables with respect to the individual (including social and personality dimensions) and multiple variables in the learning situation (not only learning of facts but of skills and attitudes) and the interaction between individual and situation. Similarly disciplines cannot continue to teach similar or complementary materials without some cognizance of the fact and some effort to show relationships among areas.

Elizabeth M. Drews is associate professor of education, Michigan State University, East Lansing.

Almost everyone seems to want more of what we have—in unrevised, unexpurgated form. However, there are breakthroughs that have merit. New ways, some suggested long ago, such as critical thinking and problem solving approaches to teaching are being tried. Efforts have been made in general education and core programs to point up commonalities in the subject areas and thus reduce compartmentalization of learning. Lateral transmission of knowledge, not waiting for the long, vertical process of giving the facts to the teacher in his youth and waiting for him, in his maturity, to pass this knowledge on to the pupil, is being attempted. For example, efforts are being made through teacher and student training programs, such as the ones sponsored by the National Science Foundation, to reach teacher and student simultaneously.

Sense of Humaneness

The other area of imminent concern, besides how to teach the known and unveil the unknown, is the urgent need to live together peacefully in ever-increasing proximity. World unrest, eddying out into countless microcosmic maelstroms of dissension, demands an immediate re-examination of the way the young are taught, especially how a sense of humaneness and responsibility is developed. Perhaps man's emotions are hopelessly unchangeably primitive and uncontrollable. However, recent studies in the areas of ego psychology, mental hygiene, and client-centered therapy point to at least a few people who have become emotionally mature adults with both a firm sense of reality and a broad humanitarian concern.

We are faced, then, with the need for developing newer and better ways of

processing the proliferating facts, an approach that requires the development both of more able thinking and of values more consonant with our democratic mandates. Progress in these areas will not be easy. We do not know what thinking is, we do not know if people can be taught to think critically, nor do we know if resistant, single-channeled people can be brought to a point of openminded, multi-variate thought. However, efforts are being made to describe the thought processes and experiments are being conducted to study the development of aspects of these processes such as flexibility, fluency, and divergent-convergent thinking.

Wide scale investigation is also under way to determine whether the school can and does influence the learning of values. Such approaches, essential as they are, are extravagant with both funds and time. They do not supply ready answers to technical problems such as overfilled and understaffed classrooms. But they represent surely, if undramatically, a quest for quality. And they may counteract tendencies, forced by sheer numbers, to overorganize and overinstitutionalize. For we must remember that education fails in direct proportion to its failure to involve people in learning, thinking and caring.

Quality in education has been broadly described as a development of both intellectual involvement and moral commitment. More specifically we must ask how does each student arrive at an optimum level of such development. What materials, what knowledges, and what kinds of learning situations foster maximum intellectual and emotional growth for all? What is the design that will best free the mind for limitless quests and still supply the environment that will nurture warm and loving creatures?

Beyond the Text

In an era of rapid change a specific text cannot remain the center of a learning sequence for any length of time. A single text is not enough differentiated in reading levels to meet the diverse abilities present in any grade. Such a text rarely presents a number of points of view (although textbooks could follow a critical thinking, research model better than they do). Finally, a text published at a point in time is soon outmoded (in some areas before it is off the press). There must be more than lip-service to this matter of teaching at the child's level. Too many teachers still have their retarded groups "going slow in the hard book."

There must also be an early awareness on the part of the child that texts are fallible, that authorities vary in competence and in outlook, and above all that books are written by people and people make errors deliberate and otherwise. Thus, no textbook can be said to be the final reference. Quality in materials means going beyond the text to trade and reference books and going beyond books to periodicals, brochures, and in some fields (such as the new mathematics) to mimeographed reports. The written word must also be supplemented, in light of needs for veracity and recency, by materials presented by outside consultants in the classroom or on TV.

Curriculum and subject matter areas, as well as materials, must be re-examined in the search for quality. There must be a rethinking of the boundaries surrounding areas of knowledge and of basic changes in concepts within the areas, both in terms of kaleidoscopic change. New ideas and new facts will have to be introduced and the old sequences of ideas will have to be re-evaluated. Of the old, those that

survive may well be introduced to a younger child or at a different grade level. The old ideas that the very young are primarily interested in the "home and family" and the "here and now" can no longer be supported. It has been reported that first graders often know more about the Eiffel Tower than they do about their own City Hall. The hoary argument "shall we accelerate or enrich?" lacks coherence when it is realized that rarely can we distinguish between these processes when they are applied to a body of knowledge.

Not only will the content of curriculum have to be renovated so that it will include the essential new and exclude the nonessential old, but the content of the child, "what he knows," must be considered. It is immoral for us to squander a child's time by asking him to learn what he already knows.

Pre-tests (and using the results) and qualifying examinations must be used at all levels. At the primary level the primary unit plan and skill-level testing are being tried as ways of preventing use of inappropriate material and wasteful repetition. High school students are allowed to take college level programs in the summer and are, in many universities, given advanced standing credit as a result of examinations. However, upper elementary and junior high schools seem particularly lacking in their means of giving differentiated instruction. The N.E.A. and N.C.A., as well as many school systems, are becoming concerned with these problems and solutions may be forthcoming.

Way of Life

Although the content—what is taught and when—is a basic consideration, and the materials used for presentation must

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meet quality standards too, research in many areas is confirming some old suspicions that classroom climate and the emotional concomitants of learning are of transcendent importance. Robert White of Harvard recently reviewed research in learning.² He stressed the importance of freedom, of exploratory behavior, of challenge, of activity and manipulation, and finally, of an opportunity to learn tangential things quietly and without pressure. All of this points to increasing needs for autonomy and self-determination in a school setting overflowing with facts to be learned. Disregard for a child's interests and lack of effort to involve him emotionally result in poor quality learning and a lasting unwillingness on the child's part to continue the process.

In discussion of needs we often forget the need for excitement and adventure,

² Robert White. "Motivation Reconsidered: The Concept of Competence." *Psychological Review*. No. 9, 1959.

for novelty and variety. School subjects are too often humdrum and cut-and-dried while knowns and unknowns in these very areas of knowledge pulsate with excitement. We also forget, in our sense of urgency and our need to crowd so much into so little time, that the new research reaffirms the need for the kind of breadth of learning possible when pressures are moderate and self-imposed. Strong pressures may speed up learning, but at the cost of narrowing it. As White indicates, these narrow and efficient learnings make a contribution in capacity to deal with the environment but "a much greater effectiveness results from having this capacity fed also from learnings that take place in quieter times."

Today imagination is valued more than it has ever been. As Bronowski, the British scientist-philosopher, has said—it is the method of science. Every induction is a speculation. This ultimate of qualities—"creative observation"—cannot be achieved without stimulation but time for respite is also important. Such needs for solitude are too often given short shrift in school hours filled with "n" subjects and out-of-school hours consumed relentlessly by clubbing and dance classes, music lessons and homework.

Quality is, then, to be found in the individual who has mastered a process and developed a way of life rather than in the one who has only made accumulations of facts. In contrast to the bland-flavored, fact-stuffed *pièce de résistance* of that anachronism, the quiz show, this person of quality has intensity of imagination, versatility of knowledge, and a total involvement in learning. He is, and remains, alive, flexible and questing and does not become a repository for static learnings and prejudices. Finally, he is able to hold and make functional values that enhance the human condition.

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