

A Block of Time— for General Education

*Integration of learning
is fostered
in a block of time
longer than the usual period.*

The best grounding in all formal schooling at all levels, both for special tasks and for general responsibilities, is a broad education in which the social, biological and physical sciences, mathematics, the humanities and the arts are learned in concert and in their relationships.¹

THE significance of reorganizing instruction into more meaningful units and the necessity for blocking instructional time for effective use of direct, firsthand experience have been the concerns of thoughtful educators for many years. Early in this century, the introduction of half-day programs for vocational education, double periods for laboratory courses, and unlimited time after classes for extracurricular activities reflected the necessity for flexible scheduling to make learning more meaningful. On the contemporary scene fresh approaches in the form of educational television, the Trump proposals, independent study, and others have challenged time-honored concepts of the orderly 50-minute schedule and the neatly packaged bodies of

subject matter apportioned to the school day.

An additional development of the past three decades to challenge further the efficacy of the fragmented daily program has been the steady growth of core programs in general education. Such programs have been characterized by an integration of learning within a longer block of time than the usual class period. A 1958 report from the United States Office of Education² indicated that approximately one-third of the separately organized junior high schools in this country now provide an extended block of time for general education.

Despite these encouraging developments toward unifying learning in general education, one may discern a number of current efforts to direct the curriculum of the junior high school toward more atomistic and fragmented patterns of organization. Although Dr. Conant

¹The Fund for Adult Education. *Education for Public Responsibility*.

²Grace Wright. *Block-Time Classes and the Core Program in the Junior High School*. Bulletin No. 6, 1958. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. p. 1.

recommends a block-of-time in Grades Seven and Eight in which a student's classes in English and social studies would be staffed by the same teacher, his curricular recommendations imply rigid departmentalization. Educational television, which has a potential for programming viewing experiences of an interdisciplinary scope, has not capitalized on this possibility to any great extent. If the tentative schedule of courses proposed by the Midwest Program on Airborne Television Instruction³ is indicative of patterns in this field, further departmentalization of instruction may be fostered by this medium not only in the junior high school but in the elementary school as well. Curriculum innovations in the areas of mathematics and science during the post-sputnik era have reflected an emphasis on early specialization, a condition that complicates further the task of offering a broad general education. In the light of these developments, it seems useful to look again at the nature and scope of core programs organized around the values, skills and knowledge required for common citizenship and to restate the case for such a program in the junior high school.

What is the core program and what advantages does it offer for the improvement of general education for early adolescents? The term "core" refers to that part of the curriculum which utilizes two periods or more for education that meets common or universal needs of students in modern society. Thus, two distinguishing characteristics are noted. *First*, the core is concerned with general or liberal education in contrast to special or technical education, which is also necessary but organized for the variety and

differences in talents and interests. *Second*, instead of short, separate periods for isolated subjects, the core embraces a larger block of time for a unified organization of experiences which cut across the major disciplines. These comprehensive and integrating characteristics foster conditions which lead in practice to other discernible values of a core program. Of these, the following three have special significance for improving secondary education on the junior high school level.

Case for an Integrating Program

The core program encourages students to establish relationships between and among fields of knowledge.

Effective core programs have a planned content of problem areas. From these areas instructional units are developed that help students pull together knowledge from several disciplines in solving the problems of common citizenship. That modern systems of communication make possible the application of knowledge from many disparate fields to the common problems of living has been demonstrated by the scientists. In building a basic education for adolescents, we can recognize with them that, ". . . the very survival of our society itself may depend upon our ability to reaffirm in the most concrete and specific ways the unity of all human knowledge, both theoretical and practical."⁴

In dealing recently with the sequential and lateral relationships discernible in an effectively organized curriculum, Tyler wrote:

From the standpoint of the achievement of continuity and sequence, the discrete subjects, the discrete courses for each semes-

⁴ J. H. Shera. "Knowledge Goes Berserk." *The Saturday Review* 39: 69, December 1, 1956.

³ *Midwest Program on Airborne Television Instruction*. Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University, 1960. p. 12-13.

Victor B. Lawhead is Assistant Dean, Ball State Teachers College, Muncie, Indiana; and is Chairman of the ASCD Commission on Core Teaching.

ter or year, and the discrete lessons, all impose difficulties that make vertical organization less likely to occur. There are too many boundary lines from one structure to another to assure of easy transition. Vertical organization is facilitated when the courses are organized over a period of years in larger units and in larger general framework.*

In making a case for establishing lateral relationships he continues:

... to achieve integration is difficult if the organizing structure is composed of many specific pieces, since the tendency is to arrange the elements of each piece into some more unified form but to work out the relationship of each of these pieces to each other becomes more difficult as more pieces are involved. Thus, fifteen or sixteen specific subjects in the elementary school present more hazards to the achievement of integration than an organization which has four or five broad fields like the language arts, the social studies, health and physical education, and the like. A core curriculum involves even less difficulty in achieving integration so far as the interposition of boundaries between subjects is concerned.*

The core program facilitates guidance and counseling of students.

Since the core program takes its name from the fact that it represents the heart of general education, we should not overlook its secondary responsibility for nurturing specialized interests and abilities up to a point short of technical competence. This additional responsi-

* Ralph Tyler. "Curriculum Organization." *The Integration of Educational Experiences*. 57th Yearbook, National Society for the Study of Education. Chicago: the Society, University of Chicago Press, 1958. p. 123.

* *Ibid.*

bility of general education defines further the guidance role of the core teacher. In placing primary emphasis on common learnings we sometimes overlook the additional task of general education of fostering unique interests and talents of pupils. The problem here is not one of meeting fully such needs but of bringing them into clearer perspective so that the student can choose wisely his experiences in the elective or special interest offerings. To assist him in this process is to provide him one of the most significant of guidance services—whether such service is called "counseling" or just good teaching.

The longer block of time that characterizes the core program has several implications for effective guidance of students. In contrast to other teachers on a staff the core teacher is likely to spend more time with a given group of pupils and hence should be in a better position to know them as individuals. Furthermore, sound testing procedures support the practice of having tests administered by persons who are close to the students and who probably will be in a better position to interpret results.

The content of the core is problem centered and hence more conducive to personal and social guidance. The core program with a planned structure of problem areas increases the possibility that the real life concerns of the students will be given attention in the classroom. An examination of proposed problem areas similar to those listed by Lurry and Alberty⁷ reveals that all such areas offer opportunities for students to relate individual problems to those being studied in a wider context. Some areas, however, are more provocative than others. Con-

⁷ Elsie Alberty and Lucille Lurry. *Developing a High School Core Program*. New York: The Macmillan Co., 1957. p. 60-89.

sider for example, the learning units that might fall under the broad areas of Self Understanding or of Employment and Vocation.

The core program connects the curriculum content more directly to the needs of students and demands of society.

A flexible content of problem areas enables the school staff to relate curriculum content more directly to student needs and to societal demands than is possible in the subject-centered program. Courses for students in separate disciplines often promote ground-covering attempts at teaching. Such attempts may have little direct bearing on the real problems of personal development or on the needs of the society that supports education.

In recent years curriculum design for the schools has drawn from two general sources its concept of the learner's needs—studies of individual development and of the social milieu in which children mature. The former source, having as one of its antecedents the emphasis on the "unfolding process" of Rousseau's naturalism, has encouraged a curriculum devoid of any discernible structure. The second source, orienting the curriculum primarily to societal demands, has been largely responsible for incorporating the logically organized bodies of subject matter into basic curriculum structure. Lyman Bryson, formerly with the Columbia Broadcasting Company's "Invitation to Learning" series, reflected this social emphasis when he wrote:

The first task of every teacher is to arrange, out of superior knowledge and training and years, those experiences for the students which will bring out in them the qualities society has need of. The young learn by their own experiences—as the old do also. The difference is that the experiences out of which the adult finds and

creates and criticizes the principles of his living may be accidental; those of the child are arranged by the teacher, who is deputy of the culture.*

The core program of general education reconciles these divergent tendencies by organizing for instruction significant problem areas around which student needs seem to cluster. Emphasis is placed on the personal-social nature of adolescent needs and the qualities of interaction in human experience. Viewed in this light, a concept of youth needs implies study of the adolescent behavior at various maturity levels and also an examination of the whole environmental pattern in which people operate. Study of the adolescent in his culture reveals needs that reflect the regularities and uniformities of the cultural pattern, but also deviations and variations of the individual. A core program with a flexibly planned block of time enables a staff to develop a general curriculum based on common needs in such areas as communication, value clarification, family life, intercultural relations, consumer problems and others of educational significance.

The core offers additional opportunities for improving instruction.

In addition to the foregoing values other obvious advantages of such a program, which call for less analysis, should be cited. For example, the core makes classroom practice consistent with sound learning principles by encouraging genuine problem solving. With curriculum content rooted in the persistent problems of living such as communication, family life, vocational planning, value clarification, community understanding, and others, the learning experience can reflect the important roles of interest,

* Lyman Bryson. *The Drive Toward Reason*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954. p. 38.

involvement and meaning in the educative process.

The core, with its extended block of time, provides the teacher with a curriculum organization which fosters the use of community resources in teaching. Direct firsthand experiences in the community with industrial, social and cultural agencies can be planned and developed without encroaching on time scheduled for other studies.

Furthermore, such a program in the junior high school provides a better transition for the pupil in the shift from the self-contained classroom of the elementary school to the departmentalized program of the senior high school. A junior high school having a core program offers students an experience which contains elements of both the elementary and secondary program. Such an arrangement assures a continuing of emphasis from one level to the next and helps the student make the shift with a minimum of distracting adjustments.

An additional advantage is gained by reducing the amount of pupil-accounting by the teacher. In a time of bulging class enrollments, the core offers the possibility of reducing materially the "student load"

of the teacher. In contrast to having six separate classes with an aggregate of 150-180 pupils, the teacher with two core sections has about one-third the number of pupils with whom he may become closely acquainted for effective teaching and guidance.

Finally, the flexibility of organization offers increased possibilities for curriculum revision and improvement. Curriculum modification and improvement are more readily achieved in the flexible structure of the core since here it is not necessary to eliminate, add or rearrange specific courses each time a change seems desirable. Representing a reorganization of general education along a design that would eliminate the necessity for adding new courses constantly, the core offers the possibility for continuous appraisal with changes in emphasis being made as needed.

With education at all levels decrying the rigidity of curriculum structure based on narrow specialization, it seems most crucial in the junior high school to consider a program which asserts the unity of human knowledge but recognizes the need to extend individual talents toward diverse competencies.

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