

Curriculum development in

The Changing Neighborhood

THERE is no more crucial issue in curriculum development than that of the changing neighborhood. It is here that the real tests of citizenship education are applied. Such places provide social laboratories to experiment with programs designed for a world society, if we but recognize them and use them as such. They present in microcosm the real issues of our world. It is abundantly clear that children and youth learn their citizenship in such situations from the "curriculum of life" rather than from the school.

"Changing neighborhood" is a relative term. All neighborhoods change. Our most stable communities have a turnover of about ten percent in school enrollments per year. Pupil migration, of course, is only one dimension of change. There is continuous change in the structure and nature of institutional life. Letty Russell makes the assertion, for instance, that, "The family is no longer the basic unit of middle class society."¹

There is continuous change in ideas, ideals and values, due to the impact of the mass culture of which we are a part.

¹ Letty M. Russell. "The Family and Christian Education in Modern Urban Society." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1; Nov. 1960. p. 33.

Power relations among groups in the community are constantly changing. By "changing neighborhood," we usually refer to the community in conflict because of the altered relations among the groups in its confines.

This alteration is accentuated by population movements—especially if the incoming group is: (a) visible, e.g., of a different color; (b) of a different socioeconomic status; or (c) different because of religious or other ideological factors. Some indication of the impact of population movement may be gathered from the following facts:

... The White House Conference fact book, *Children in a Changing World*, reported that in 1958 twelve million children moved at least from one residence to another.

... New York City, whose experience may be typical of other metropolitan areas, dismisses about 40,000 children per year by transfer. About 12,000 more pupils are transferred to suburban counties than come into the city through transfer exchange.

... In spite of this outmigration and the fact that every third seat has been provided

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in a new school building since the war, the Board of Education announced that in 1960-61 every sixth child in the city's schools is on an abnormal schedule, and 55,000 are on short hours.

... Detroit, Michigan, during 1960-61 is sending 5,000 children daily by bus from overcrowded sections of the city to schools where there is space for them.

... On Manhattan Island over 35 percent of the pupils of the public schools are Negro; 33.6 percent are Puerto Rican in background, and the remainder "others."

... The Board of Education of New Rochelle, New York, is now appealing a Federal Court order which mandates the correction of *de facto* segregation which stems from growth of Negro population in that suburban community.

... The "Welcome Wagon" in White Plains, New York, indicated that, of the 37 new families in that suburb in one month, 24 were Jewish, 11 were Catholic, and two were Protestant.

... A new development in the north end of New Rochelle, New York, has an elementary school which is 97 percent Jewish in enrollment.

Such facts may illustrate the nature of change, and something of its extent.

On Being Realistic

What do we mean by being realistic? We mean an honest assessment of human relationships which goes beyond the usual glittering generalities and clichés that so often characterize our efforts. What is involved in such an assessment?

1. First, we mean that we need a better understanding of the role of conflict in intergroup relations, and some attention as to how to deal with it. Most educators are from the middle class. Contentiousness and conflict are alien to our natures. We interpret Micah's great vision of the "time when the swords would

be beat into plowshares and the spears into pruning hooks, and man will lay down his arms and study war no more" as meaning that a time will come when there will be no more conflict. Of course it is imperative that we find a means short of war for settling differences. We should also realize, however, that we cannot have freedom without its producing some differences; we cannot have differences without our interests becoming organized on a group basis, resulting in some jostling and a certain amount of conflict. In fact, a case could be made that some conflict is the hallmark of a free society. Our job is not that of how to evade conflict, but rather (a) how to keep conflict from becoming stultifying and destructive, and (b) how to use its dynamic force to foster growth and development in citizenship.

When a school principal says he has no problems, he is either lying, is not perceptive enough to know a problem when he sees it, or else is so authoritarian that he does not allow sufficient freedom of interaction for problems to come to the surface. This latter, unfortunately, tends to be the behavior pattern of the school leader in the changing neighborhood.

2. We mean by being realistic that our behavior in the changing neighborhood, much better than what we say, tells what our *real* values are. The middle class flight to the suburbs, when neighborhoods start changing, the tendency of "nice" people to sit on the side line as long as possible when southern communities are going through the desegregation process, the reluctance of the "old timers" of suburban areas to share power and services with the newcomers—all spell out values our children learn by our behaviors.

What of the schools in such places? By and large they are ahead of their communities, but are limited in what they can do about most pivotal issues. Most experts agree that were it not for the community, schools would not have too much trouble with even the most pressing of neighborhood change issues. For instance, the New Rochelle High School invited students from Washington and Baltimore to come to their community to see desegregated programs at work. The Board of Education, however, has persistently refused to alter neighborhood school zones to send either white children into the Negro school areas or to allow Negro children who felt discriminated against to transfer out. The Board is fighting in the higher courts against violating the neighborhood school concept when larger school systems such as Baltimore and New York City have allowed "open enrollments."

3. By being realistic we mean neither glossing over nor unduly lifting up problems which beset the school when it deals with change. The school in the transition area is a target for many of the frustrations which people experience in other facets of community life.

It is hard to work in such tension areas and be relaxed and permissive. The administrator tends to assume a "bureaucratic" role, administer by directive, play his cards close to his chest, and develop a glib "line" about his program. It is most often a "paper program," with all the right and defensible content, but with little of the spirit of modern education. He becomes an expert at "patting irate mothers on the shoulder" and getting them out of his office without honestly dealing with their complaints. In such instances the morale of the staff becomes very low, and the "climate" of the school becomes a deterrent to

healthy growth—a negative aspect of curriculum.

Another dimension of the problem is the tendency, often, to overexaggerate difficulties. Some years ago this author worked with the Washington, D.C., schools as they were preparing to desegregate. It was noted, even then, that a combination of forces made it evident that many Negro children would be more handicapped in academic competition than would their classmates among the whites. We spent quite a bit of time on this problem. It surprised no one that this should be true. In the hands of politicians who were bent on discrediting the program of desegregation these facts were exploited to the fullest in a way which taxed the school authorities' resources in dealing with them. It took real courage and much patience to "stand up" to them on what were exaggerations of obvious problems.

Promising Practices

What are some of the promising practices in dealing with changing neighborhoods?

1. At the level of school administration, the big issue is zoning. Who goes to school with whom, is the first big question. Here, the Princeton Plan has much to recommend it. Instead of two neighborhood schools, one largely Negro and the other largely white, they merged the grades and sent all the children to school together, the first three grades in one building and the other three grades to the other building. This avoided a segregated neighborhood school.

The "open enrollment" principle affords a way to ameliorate some problems of change. It has, however, a two-

edged danger. First, it works both ways. When one group is allowed to transfer, other groups are entitled to the same consideration. Second, sole reliance on this approach puts upon the parents the initiative for seeking a better education. This should be the school's responsibility. It can be used effectively to stifle protests, because the dissatisfied parent can always be told he is free to send his child elsewhere if he is not pleased.

Some school systems use busses to move children from one neighborhood to another and to provide integrated experiences as a by-product of meeting school building shortages. With the shift of populations and the shortage of facilities such distribution of children allays somewhat the problems of neighborhood change. Some community leadership is advocating that transportation of children be used to desegregate all such residential concentrations.

2. For most schools, *grouping* is the biggest issue. "Beating the Russians" and "getting into the right colleges" have created a kind of hysteria which has forced educators to abdicate democratic grouping policies. A suburban community's experience is typical. Heretofore the children have been assigned in such a manner that all classes had some of the slower children who tended to come from the two low income groups. Now they are yielding to pressure to group homogeneously, and to orbit the bright children into the "academic stratosphere." This means they are segregating the children of the less advantaged groups into "academic ghettos" within the school program.

On this issue we are torn between what is possible and what is ideal. The Washington, D.C., schools developed a four track plan to meet the grouping difficulty. The New York City school

system has catered to the increasingly popular "special examination" high school as a means of accomplishing the same objectives. This writer does not accept the assumption that bright children are necessarily penalized by being in classes with less academically talented children. The weakness lies in the limitations of the average teacher in leading a class as a social group. A case could be made that far more teachers fail because of their limitations in group leadership than because of their limitations as scholars. With such limitations, we cut the pattern of grouping to fit the competencies of teachers rather than to exemplify sound education.

One practice which is still in an experimental stage is called the *dual progress* plan. Here a child may go as fast in science and mathematics as his talents and interests allow, in what might be thought of as ungraded sequences. In citizenship and communication arts, however, the children are grouped heterogeneously by maturation levels to learn the arts of human relationships.

3. What of programs? Schools in neighborhoods in tension tend to spawn "gimmicks" which may have public relations value but not too much substantive content. There is no substitute for the application of what we know as sound educational practices. They are harder to apply, sometimes, in neighborhoods in tension. For instance, in one changing neighborhood Negro parents charged, "You teach white people's children to read. Why is it you can't teach ours?" This is a good question. Teachers in this situation "scuttled" programs of reading readiness and all they believed in about teaching reading, and resorted to rote. This, alone, they felt they could defend against such pressure.

One promising technique is that used in New York City's "Higher Horizons" project. This is an attempt to help children who have been hampered by a subservient role in the community to "raise and maintain" their aspiration levels. The project involves considerable guidance staff and other personnel. It will bear watching, for it gets at a difficult issue in schools serving heterogeneous communities. This is how to foster creativity in a child of lower socioeconomic status—particularly in the child whose family is so deprived by its social class position that he has become apathetic.

The opposite type of program is presented by an elite suburban school in Scarsdale, New York. Here the "new-comers" are upwardly mobile, middle class people determined to find a status school system, a diploma from which will assure that their children will get into the "right" colleges. A recent survey indicated that graduates of this system made average grades of C in their college work. The pressure on the children is so great that they apparently suffer a delayed reaction when they go to college. Social agencies in the county refer to a characteristic of this community's children's emotional problems as "the Scarsdale syndrome."

What of Values?

What of the values of citizenship? Do we believe that children reared in 100 percent white, middle class suburbs have experiences which prepare them as well to take their places in a world of heterogeneous peoples as do the children reared in the maelstrom of life of heterogeneous communities? Have middle class Americans who flee to suburban sanctuaries lost faith in the basic stuff of hu-

manity? Have we lost the thrill which comes from a reaffirmation of democratic faith in people, because some of the new-comers stumble in their first fumbling steps toward freedom? Do we see only their errors, their garishness, their crime and rude manners?

A Southern Negro teacher related how she admonished her pupils to "never go to the back of the bus to sit. After all the price we have paid to win the right to sit up front we should take advantage of it." Many people would not see her insistence on this right as "goodness." Rather, they would only see it as "pushiness."

Do we really believe that the minority group child or the child of the low socioeconomic heritage possesses creativity the same as do other children, and that his or her limitations are solely of circumstance? Or do we believe we are working with inferior materials and wasting our lives in a futile effort?

In this conforming era, when pressures are on us to "beat the Russians" and otherwise meet the demands of "national purpose," are we forsaking something precious in our heritage? That something was a faith that national purpose would be best served if every child were helped to develop to the fullest along the lines of his own unique bent. Is the growing search for science talent, College Board Examinations, and other such pressures causing us to mould children to these societal demands rather than developing them in ways unique to themselves? Does this trend make the school less competent to deal with the changing neighborhood?

Thoughtful consideration of these deeper questions related to the function of the school in our society is basic in understanding the realistic issues of the changing neighborhood.

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