Cultural Orientation of American Teachers

in implementing change

To the extent that human beings discover the nature of the cultural process, they can anticipate, prepare, and—to at least a limited degree—control. Americans are now at a period in history when they are faced with the facts of cultural differences more clearly than they can take with comfort. Recognition and tolerance of the deeper cultural assumptions of China, Russia, and Britain will require a difficult type of education.¹

AMONG its major accomplishments, the secondary school in America has been substantially successful in educating for responsible American citizenship its native children and the children of the thousands of immigrants in the first decades of the 1900's. The present scope of several content areas and the commonly found objectives of these areas can clearly be related to cultural changes in America in the first 30 years of this century. But cultural change never stops. It has continued through the Depression 'Thirties, the Warring 'Forties, the Threatening 'Fifties, and is going on even at this moment.

Because we are caught up in our own culture, because our culture is so much a part of us that it hardly enters into our consciousness, we can with any ease understand only what it was. What it is seldom becomes apparent to us. This is one reason that there are without any doubt an enormous number of American teachers who are devising curriculum and who are teaching children for living in a culture that was, not in one that is. Dangerous as this orientation may be, it must not be deemed willful. Because we are products of our own cultures, we find it next to impossible to change by ourselves. Change in cultural orientation must be aided; and, for teachers, the aid must come—quickly, substantially and intelligently—in programs of education for prospective teachers now in college and for experienced teachers now in service.

Recognition is widening that the scope of content in some areas of the secondary school curriculum must be changed. Particularly in the social studies, where the West has been almost exclusively emphasized, are increasing numbers of teachers being asked to teach about the non-Western world. Products of a Western-oriented education, teachers are being asked to do something that many

of them, through no fault of their own, are not equipped to do.

To study the history, the literature, the economics, the geography of non-Western areas is not enough. To wish to do good for those less well off than we are is not enough. An understanding which approaches and even reaches empathy is required, an understanding which provides a rationale for the study of man as man and of the involvement of man with man everywhere. American teachers have been formed by a culture largely middle-class, insular and affluent, with growing emphasis on hedonism and materialism. They must somehow learn to examine cultures that are none of these and through this examination be changed substantially in their own cultural orientation.

Basic Attitudes

Study of a culture requires the acceptance of certain basic attitudes and premises. At least three are fundamental for both teachers and their students as they turn to a study of the non-Western world.

First, the customs and values of the culture into which a person is born and in which he grows up are the major conditioners of his behavior. Ruth Benedict wrote, in Patterns of Culture:

There is no social problem it is more incumbent upon us to understand than this role of custom. Until we are intelligent as to its laws and varieties, the main complicating facts of human life must remain unintelligible.²

Second, differences among cultures must be looked upon as neither good nor bad because they are different; they must be looked upon as existing. To impose the standards of one culture upon the study of another is to take an unrealistic and unscientific course. To look upon an item of behavior in a culture as good or bad because it is different is to block immediately any progress in understanding the behavior. If judgment is to be made, it can be made only after the behavior is understood in terms of its own culture patterns. James Thurber, with his characteristic light firmness, wrote in “Interview with a Lemming” of a scientist tramping through northern Europe and his encounter with a lemming. The scientist talks with the creature and discovers that the lemming has made a lifelong study of man, just as the scientist has made a lifelong study of lemmings:

“I don’t understand,” said the scientist, “why you lemmings all rush down to the sea and drown yourselves.”

“How curious,” said the lemming. “The one thing I don’t understand is why you human beings don’t.”³

Third, if we are to understand behavior of any group in any culture, we must understand the institutions provided in the society. The word “institutions” is used in a broad sense. It refers to marriage, death, entrance into adulthood, religion, hierarchy of values, and other patterns of behavior which have become “institutionalized,” which have become established as traditions in the culture.

With these basic generalizations as guides for interpretation, the teacher can turn to materials concerning non-Western areas. The fundamental purpose of the teacher with his students will be, of course, to involve students with peo-


people whose cultural patterns are different from those of the student. Therefore the subject matter in which the teacher must prepare himself and which he presents to students will be the cultures themselves: ethics, religion, concept of man, music, painting, literature, dance, taboos, general values, education system, governmental structure, architecture, costume, legal system—in short, all the ways in which a culture can express itself. To understand a country’s political posture, one must know something of the culture of that country. Aspects of a culture can be naturally motivating to study of a country’s politics and are also actually necessary to an understanding of the country’s history.

Curricular Reorientation

Implied in what has already been said are not only reorientation of the teacher but also a resulting reorientation of the curriculum. H. L. Elvin, Director of the University of London Institute of Education, has pointed this out with directness:

It seems clear that we have reached a stage in the history of mankind when very important parts of our human arrangements must be on a world-wide scale. What might be called cultural nationalism is educationally often a very good thing, but political nationalism, except in terms of sensible devolution, is bound now to become increasingly a thing of the past if we are to survive. The changes in our outlook and habits that are necessary for this to succeed cannot come about unless in our education we decide to prepare young people for a life of this kind as we have hitherto prepared them for a life limited by national allegiance.¹


Mr. Elvin has emphasized changes in outlook and habits. Such changes are behavioral, compounded of knowledge and of emotions and of a concept of man in his human, nonpolitical sense. Attitudes and perceptions will determine the behavior. Directions toward re-orientation of the teacher and of the curriculum are clearly to be inferred from three inescapable conditions: (a) the future is unknown in detail but it is known in at least one context that is certain—more and wider and deeper involvement with men everywhere; (b) this certain involvement re-emphasizes changes in behavior as the major ends of learning; (c) the future cannot be prepared for in detail, but it can be prepared for in terms of broad knowledge, and in concepts of and attitudes toward the world.

Objectives of the school must turn toward the production of a breed of Americans who are responsible citizens of the World rather than only citizens of the Western World. Those who make the curriculum must discover the unifying elements among the stories of the development of man and use them to balance the dividing elements which encourage judgment of other men by the criteria of our own culture. These unifying elements can be found in the patterns of culture, the subjects which cultural anthropology studies. The content of other cultures must be studied without bias so that the motivating values of other peoples may be understood, the purpose being always to know before one judges. The teacher cannot study all cultures in detail, of course, but he can start with any one and, through studying it, make the learning of others easier.

Teachers must be helped to comprehend what they should learn, how they
should learn it, why they should learn it, and what behavioral changes they must seek to effect in their students if the rapidly increasing pressure to include study of the non-Western world in schools is to have salutary and lasting results. In some schools, new content outlines have been prepared which do no more than add historical, political and geographical facts to an already overburdened course in world history whose Western-Civilization rationale is not congenial to their addition. In some other schools, cultural orientation of teachers is being attempted. In these schools, study of the non-Western world will eventually be united with, rather than added to, the curriculum, and the objectives of the school will take into account that “very important parts of our human arrangements must be on a world-wide scale.”

**Current Projects**

Several efforts of this latter type are in progress in some Pennsylvania schools now. One of these is a cooperative venture among 12 school systems, members of a School Study Council served by the Educational Service Bureau of the University of Pennsylvania. In August 1961, selected teachers from the 12 schools were brought together for several days to initiate the project. Working with the group were a cultural anthropologist, a curriculum specialist who had worked in Asia, a specialist in social studies education, a professor of East Asian history who had worked before with secondary school teachers, a consultant from the Asia Society, several graduate students from Asian countries, and a member of the staff of the Pennsylvania Department of Public Instruction. There were lectures, discussions, films, and demonstrations of music and dance. Bibliographies of source materials were provided.

In September, social studies teachers from the 12 schools began systematic study, with the specialist in social studies education as their consultant, aimed at orienting themselves further and developing curriculum for use in their schools. Objectives formulated by the group are all aimed at involvement of the student with peoples in other cultures so that man may be understood in the light of his culture.

The course in world cultures which the group members are preparing will consist of eight units: Far East, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Moslem Realm, Africa, Slavic Realm, Latin America, and Western European Culture. The obvious overlaps can easily be managed. The group has begun with the Moslem Realm. Going slowly, for there is much to do, the group members are seeking to learn thoroughly as they go rather than to produce in record time an empty outline.

Each unit, with only one being done at a time, will be organized under these headings: geography; major developments of history; major economic, political and social contributions (domestic and fine arts); and the role of the area in today’s world.

Out of an orientation of teachers to the profound cultural changes in the world can come changes in the school’s objectives and in the curriculum that get at the bases, not just the trappings and forms, of education itself. Out of such orientation can come greater perception of patterns of American cultures different from the teacher’s own. Out of such orientation can come a more sincere and genuine humanism in education, a humanism that returns to man for its subject matter.