

Curriculum Developments

Column Editor: Melvin W. Barnes

Developments in Instruction

Project on Instruction

At strategic times the National Education Association has had significant statements to make about the purposes and program of the public schools. The year 1918 saw issuance of the recommendations of the NEA Commission on the Reorganization of Secondary Education. This statement, known as the "Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education," had an impact which has been felt even to the present day. Two decades later the Educational Policies Commission of the NEA followed with "The Purposes of Education in American Democracy." In 1960 the NEA established the Project on Instruction to study the tasks of public education in the decade of the sixties. The beginnings of this effort coincided with EPC's preparation of "The Central Purpose of American Education." It may be observed in passing that the cardinal objectives numbered seven in 1918, four in 1938 and one in 1961.

To date, the published reports of the NEA's Project on Instruction consist chiefly of three rather brief volumes: *The Principals Look at the Schools*, *The Scholars Look at the Schools* and *Current Curriculum Studies in Academic Subjects*. Later, more comprehensive works will deal with "Education in a Changing

Society," "Deciding What To Teach," "Organizing and Planning for Teaching" and a summary or overview volume. In pursuit of its task the Project Committee has conducted several seminars, sought the counsel of many scholars and other experts, and authorized the preparation of position papers for use by the committee and its writers.

The Character of Change

The Principals Look at the Schools, published in May 1962, is a report of a nationwide study of instructional practices. Through the Research Department of the NEA a major survey was conducted to determine the status of curricular developments. A scientific sample of 1441 principals in elementary and secondary schools throughout the nation was canvassed for views of recent changes in and the current status of American schools. Three reference points in time were set: 1956, 1961 and 1966. Each principal assessed the progress and direction of change he had witnessed in his school over the past five years and added his prediction as to what he expected to see in the next five.

The "one most important" change of the past five years, the elementary principals said, was a shift toward heavier

emphasis upon subject matter. They saw new and modified methods as the second most important area of change, with innovations in the use of teaching materials in third place. Apparently the textbook is still the teacher's best friend, for the respondents ranked it as the most influential of all teaching resources, with locally prepared curriculum materials of secondary, but considerable, importance.

An increase in achievement and in ability grouping was reported. Eighty-one percent of the large secondary schools and 52 percent of the large elementary schools showed change in this direction. Percentages decreased with school size. Non-gradedness was spreading. In 1956, six percent of the schools reported some. By 1961 this figure had doubled and 26 percent expect to have this type of organization in their schools by 1966. Increasing departmentalization in elementary schools was noted. In 1956 only 22 percent of the surveyed schools were departmentalized. By 1961, 39 percent were and 53 percent expect to be by 1966. The elementary schools were also moving toward wider use of foreign languages in the curriculum. One-fifth provided such instruction in 1956; one-third anticipate doing so by 1966. Among languages added to the high school curriculum since 1956, Russian was most frequently mentioned.

According to principals' predictions, the use of language laboratories is due to rise 160 percent in elementary schools and 137 percent in high schools during the next five years. The curricular impact of the new teaching technology, including TV, tapes and teaching machines, was strongly evidenced and predicted to expand markedly in the near future.

Asked about the sources of change, the principals said that the schools' pro-

fessional leaders were chiefly responsible. National programs encouraging curricular reform were recognized as influential but ranked below local leadership as agents of change. In the future, the national efforts were judged likely to play an expanding role.

Back to the Disciplines

The Scholars Look at the Schools contains the proceedings of a three-day seminar which assembled outstanding scholars and teachers for the purpose of clarifying the role of organized knowledge in the teaching program of the public schools. Convened in Washington in June 1961, the seminar was the first conference of recent times to consider the nature of knowledge as a problem in curriculum building and teaching. The spokesmen for the disciplines attempted to state the basic concepts and modes of inquiry characteristic of each of some 20 fields of knowledge with special reference to the public school curriculum.

The following were some of the emphases of the conference:

A working partnership between educators and the representatives of the disciplines is required if we are to deal intelligently with the rising problems of the growth and change of content in the curriculum.

What children should learn and what teachers must know in order to handle subject matter today are increasingly important problems.

Teachers use knowledge in two ways: (a) the knowledge they teach and (b) knowledge about the knowledge taught.

In selecting and teaching subject matter, understanding of the structure of a particular field is increasingly useful. But scholars have as yet given inadequate

thought to questions of structure. One professor addressing the seminar said, "My business is words. The word that fascinates my colleagues is 'structure.' What is the structure of our discipline? We do not know."

Teacher preparation programs lag in teaching understanding of the fundamental concepts, methods of inquiry and organizing principles of the academic subjects.

Not all content worthy of inclusion in the curriculum is found in the organized disciplines.

A formidable task of revision of curricular content faces educators as a result of the rapid growth of knowledge and the outdating of material in current courses of study.

Reform in the Academic Fields

As everybody knows, one of the most noteworthy recent developments in American education is the rather sudden appearance of half a hundred national ventures in curricular reform in the academic subjects. While all of these are unofficial, without the force of formal authority behind them, they nevertheless exert powerful influence and confront curriculum planners with serious decisions. Several of the most potent derive great strength from federal funds administered through the National Science Foundation and the U. S. Office of Education. Teachers talking shop these days discuss their teaching fields in the specialized vocabulary of PSSC, SMSG, FLES, CHEM, CBA and other projects and studies. At no time have we seen such ferment in the subject fields. The curricular overhauling that marked the 'twenties and 'thirties was largely limited to deleting and replacing content. Today's effort goes further and deeper.

Reinforcing the national efforts, locally produced curricular guides are appearing in profusion to reflect the new content, materials and methods. Some of the results flowing from the widespread adoption of the national programs are the creation of serious breaks in curricular continuity, a heavy backlog in the in-service development of staff, the obsolescence of textbooks and the hopeless frustration of parents unable any more to help with the homework.

Current Curriculum Studies in Academic Subjects, published in June 1962, was written by Dorothy McClure Fraser for the NEA Project on Instruction. This booklet provides an authoritative summary of each of the major national projects and studies in the academic disciplines. More than 40 such ventures are included. Besides describing the projects, their sources, and the materials available to teachers, the book, in a final chapter, offers some guiding principles for the curriculum planner.

The task of decision making in instructional affairs is placed in the hands of the professional staff of the local school system. In using the results of special curriculum studies the school staff is advised first to consider the feasibility of a procedure for appraisal. A suggested step-wise plan is outlined for guidance. A second principle deals with balance and continuity in the student's total experience. A third point counsels the local leadership to plan for all members of the school population, not alone the most able. The prevailing deficit in in-service work created by the introduction of the new content, materials and methods is emphasized. After all, what the curriculum is depends greatly on what the teacher decides to make it.

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