

Changing Schools for Changing Pupils

TODAY as never before the spotlight is on our schools and on the education we are providing for our children and youth. The great advances in the scientific world, the space breakthrough, the elusive promises of an enduring peace make it imperative that we help the new generation just developing to make the most of their talents and opportunities.

Actually, gradual changes have been taking place in the American schools over a period of years. No longer do we believe that the teacher-dominated school provides the best learning situation for children. No longer are youngsters expected to stay in their seats without moving for long periods of time, to listen to frequent lectures by the teacher, and constantly to parrot back information from one textbook. A memory for minor details is not considered to be the most important asset of a student, nor is the answer to a problem more important than the reasoning and logic that bring that answer about.

In a world that is steadily growing smaller, such problems as the conflict of ideologies, the population explosion, and the difficult rise of new nations concern everyone with a dramatic im-

mediacy. Our young people must be able to deal with these; and if they are to do so adequately, the public schools must provide effective, creative leadership. This means thoughtful assessment of what we are doing, careful consideration of suggestions for change, and a blending of the old and the new in a way that will bring desired results.

Participation of youngsters in the planning, execution and evaluation of the work they do is considered essential. Use of the scientific method of problem solving, learning the importance of knowing the why as well as the how of a process, and freedom to be creative within certain limits are all part of the way of working in modern schools. Remembering that each youngster is an individual and that learning is accomplished in different ways by different children requires us to make provision to work with youngsters individually as well as in groups of various sizes, and to make available to all opportunities for learning in many areas.

Television, radio, and improved transportation and communication have all

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helped to make today's children more knowledgeable, more informed, more aware of all that is around them. They start school with different knowledges and skills than children of even a few years ago; they need a different educational pattern. They need to know how to read, to write, and to solve mathematical problems. They also need to be able to adapt to many reading situations, to use well the improved communication media, to be skillful in the new mathematics and to acquire the depth of understanding this makes possible. Moreover, it is becoming increasingly more important that children learn how to live and work in harmony with others at home and abroad.

Implications for Schools

Keeping all this in mind, what are the implications for our schools? What factors are important to consider as we plan the best possible educational opportunities for our children and young people? Which features should be retained and which changed?

First of all, we and the parents of the children we teach must be sure we agree on the purposes of our schools. Educators should lead in the determination of goals, for this is their professional responsibility. Probably one of the first jobs is to define terms on both sides. Educational jargon will have little meaning for the lay public and may only serve to cloud the issues, while glib phrases borrowed from educational critics may not express the parents' true viewpoint. Honest discussions could establish the fact that teachers and parents really have similar beliefs and goals, for both want as an end result well educated boys and girls who can have happy, productive lives.

Quality education and excellence are desired by both groups, as is the ability to cope with the fundamentals. Probably the difficulty lies not so much in improper attention to these as in a lack of agreement on what constitutes quality and frills. Do we want youngsters who have nothing but academic knowledge, or do we want them also to know and appreciate the arts, to have well developed recreation skills, and to be socially mature? On the other hand, are some of our activities less essential than others? Can some streamlining be done to make room for such opportunities as foreign languages, depth teaching for those who can handle it, and additional time for physical fitness classes?

If we want to graduate well-rounded individuals who have command of needed knowledges and skills as well as confidence, poise and ability to work with others, we must provide opportunities geared to that development. Effective instruction will be given in the skill subjects and in the creative arts and appreciations. Meaning and understanding will be stressed in all areas, and especially so in the "new" mathematics, in the problem solving and scientific methods of science classes, and in the social studies combination of history, geography and related subjects.

Meeting Individual Needs

Both the gifted and the less advantaged youngsters are receiving special attention in today's schools. Certainly if we are to achieve our oft-stated goal of giving every child the educational program he should have, we will need to vary the offering for different individuals and different groups of individuals. Those who are most able should not be made to waste time while waiting for

others, nor should the slower children be pushed too fast and too far. What constitutes challenge for one person may be quite incomprehensible for another.

Some type of grouping seems indicated, but before setting up entirely separate schools for the gifted and the less than gifted, advantages and disadvantages of such a move must be carefully weighed. Are gifted children gifted in all areas? Do we learn to get along with others by isolation from them? Can we really be sure that individuals have been correctly placed in all instances?

In the past few years, greater care has been taken to give the culturally disadvantaged a better educational break. Realization of the handicaps under which these youngsters work has brought about a more realistic curriculum for them. They need opportunities to experience many things that may seem commonplace to us. Many youngsters live in extremely inadequate surroundings. Many seldom have a "sit-down" meal with the whole family present, they sleep with several siblings in the same room as all members of the family, they have inadequate play space, and they seldom see adults read or engage in any cultural pursuits. Television is probably the sole recreation, and inadequate supervision of this is usual.

Schools must fill in the gaps for these children by making it possible for them to have many firsthand experiences, to visit community institutions and places of business, to have a wealth of facilities, equipment and supplies to work with, and thus gradually to develop backgrounds that will make academic instruction meaningful to them. Expecting these children to conform to grade standards set up for youngsters whose home and community experiences have been much richer and fuller is not

realistic. These young people will need many opportunities for direct experiences and much guidance in adapting what they learn to their needs and life expectations. They will need time to adjust and time to learn, as well as a curriculum planned to give them needed skills and appreciations.

Administrative Arrangements

A part of all curriculum planning is the organizational set-up. Whether it is best to have self-contained classrooms divided by chronological age is a matter for each system to decide, but such innovations as team teaching, the "dual progress plan," and ungraded classes all deserve consideration. What is important is that teachers have the best possible situations for working with boys and girls. Usually efforts to achieve this goal include grouping within classes for various subjects and at different times, and possibly help for the classroom teacher in such special fields as music and art. Sometimes teachers pool their efforts to take advantage of each other's strengths, and sometimes one teacher stays with a class more than one year.

All these ways of working help, but classes of no more than twenty-five should be maintained if teachers are to be expected to help each child develop to his highest potential. Results with children should be the criterion, and teachers should have time to work as best suits the situation: with an individual child, with small, flexible groups, with the class as a whole. Freedom to vary methods and procedures within certain broad considerations should be possible for professionally trained teachers whose goal is optimum development for each youngster.

Along with this freedom goes the re-

sponsibility to see that school is exciting and challenging and worthwhile for children. School should be a place where expectations, standards, and values are high, but also where good relationships and understanding teachers make participation desirable and satisfying. School also should be a place where creativity is highly prized and where children can wonder and question and explore, as well as learn the joy of mastering fundamental skills in meaningful ways.

Resources and Skills

Children should have time to think, to talk through ideas, to try different ways of working. They should learn the importance of careful planning, of logical ways of solving problems, of evaluating results. They should know what it means to be successful, to feel secure in a group, to take responsibilities that are important for themselves and for others. They should have opportunities to work alone and in small and large groups, and should have guidance in developing their skills at their own best rates.

Since good teachers are the keys to good learning situations, warm, creative, enthusiastic, well-prepared individuals are necessary. They must know each child well, know the content to be taught, and be skillful in bringing the two together. They must like children and know how to bring out the best in them.

Beyond that, books, instructional supplies, audio-visual materials, and adequate space and furniture must be provided. Ideal situations would have record players, tape recorders, projectors of all kinds, maps and globes, science equipment, construction tools and supplies, art and music materials, radio and

television sets always available for every teacher's work with his class. A wealth of good materials can pay big dividends in the instruction of children.

Freedom To Change

A perhaps disquieting thought in all of this discussion of our changing American schools is that there is no one prescription that can be best for all situations. Although a planned curriculum is necessary and desirable to produce the citizens we want, this does not mean that there must be no deviations now or in the years to come. Because our world is constantly changing, and because new facts and new ways of working are always appearing, we can never say that we have developed the perfect school.

It is imperative that we have the freedom to change and adapt as best fits individuals and situations, and that we remain open to suggestions of new and better ways of working. It is just as imperative that in schools as in the larger American society, freedom is limited by the welfare of all. Therefore, we must operate within a framework that has been thoughtfully developed. Only thus can we make certain our schools will keep pace with our changing youth and culture.

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