

Social Concepts for Early Childhood Education

ONE characteristic of the searching consideration now being given social studies programs, kindergarten through senior high school, is a concern for "beefing up" the content in the primary grades. True, some voices are raised in dissent; nevertheless, a preponderance of opinion, in tones ranging from cautious suggestion to loud outcry, seems to make a strong case for a judicious overhaul of the social studies curriculum for young children. It may be difficult to prove that children today are more precocious than were their parents, yet to say that children's experiences and interests are broader, and that the social scene has changed considerably, is to state the obvious.

In the late 1950's, several persons, such as John D. McAulay, Professor of Education at the Pennsylvania State University, were working toward a new curriculum for the primary grades. This new approach would take youngsters more quickly from the study of their immediate environment and the simplest of ideas to an examination of the world itself and its limitless challenges. O. L.

Davis, Jr.,¹ pointed out that today's children are being hidebound by the theories of the 1930's which deferred the teaching of complex principles to the very young.

Thus, Jerome Bruner in 1960 added fuel to a fire which had already been kindled. Educators became excited about his theory that complex social science principles can be introduced to young children when the framework is the experience background of those children. Bruner's "spiral" approach to teaching complex ideas, whereby concepts are introduced at an early age and retaught in succeeding years in an increasingly sophisticated fashion, made sense to many persons in education.

Trends in Social Studies

As a result of the work of the early trailblazers and Professor Bruner, trends regarding social studies opportunities for young children are beginning to emerge. There are now new directions for the primary grades in geography, in economics education, in political science and in history.

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¹ O. L. Davis, Jr. "Children Can Learn Complex Concepts." *Educational Leadership* 17: 170-75; December 1959.

Geography

There is a marked trend to introduce the study of geography earlier in the primary grades than has heretofore been customary. The justifications are multiple: (a) the post-World War II emphasis on international understanding; (b) increased travel; (c) population mobility; (d) the "shrinking" globe; (e) new theories concerning the ability of young children to conceptualize.

It is increasingly common for kindergartners to use the globe to locate places of interest. They are able to understand the basic principles governing day and night, differentiate between land and water, begin to build concepts of the earth's size and shape, and begin to understand the sun's relationship, and importance to, the earth. Five-year-olds can also work with cardinal directions on the globe and on simple maps.

First graders use the environment as an outdoor laboratory to discover in miniature geographical features which they often reproduce on a sand-table. These youngsters, in addition to making observations about weather and climate, use the "lab" to draw conclusions concerning the relationship between land slope and water flow, concerning drainage, soils and other conservation topics. The ultimate goal is that the children begin to draw conclusions about the effect of environment on man's activities.

Second graders can read and interpret maps, particularly if there is a sequential progression from the use of aerial photographs, to pictorial and semi-pictorial maps, to teacher-made maps, to commercial maps. As the children learn to make their own maps they begin to use a legend. Rose Sabaroff recommends having the children, when possible, observe physical features from a high place

in the community.² She also suggests that taking the children on a walk of exactly one mile will begin to give them an appreciation of distance. Sabaroff points out the benefits to children of early exploration of the environment when careful and scientific observations are the standard. McAulay's studies indicate that the second graders can move quickly from this type of map work to understandings concerning distant lands, using maps as one tool.

Some newer curriculum guides suggest that units concerning the home, the family and the community should incorporate material related to other cultures. When the plans for such topics capitalize on the interest of youngsters in customs, holidays, games, schools and homes, empathy for other peoples can indeed have its beginning!

Economics

Another dimension of content revision is the current emphasis on economic education. In an age when national and international economics are prime concerns, and are constantly paid heed by the various news media, this trend is not surprising. Citizens are presented with such data as the cost of living index, the Gross National Product, the unemployment rate, the gold outflow, the federal deficit and the national debt. What does all this mean?

Traditionally, the study of basic economic principles has been delayed until high school, but the work of Lawrence Senesh, Professor of Economic Education at Purdue University, has shown that young children can comprehend fundamental principles of economics

² Rose Sabaroff. "Firsthand Experiences in Geography for Second Graders." *Journal of Geography* 57: 300-306; September 1958.

when these principles are related to the children's own experiences. Senesh suggests that if such basic principles are introduced in first grade and rediscovered in succeeding grades in more complex forms, high school students will be ready for sophisticated economic generalizations.³

Professor Senesh uses cartoons to begin the development in first graders of appreciation for such principles as the conflict between unlimited wants and limited resources; the division of labor; the relationship between education and standard of living; the dependency of people's spending on taste, income and the price of goods; the relationship between price on one hand and supply and demand on the other. Senesh challenges the very young to tackle such perennial problems as the surplus of output on the nation's farms.

A typical Senesh cartoon illustrates for children how man's invention of money has encouraged specialization of work and how such specialization raises the standard of living. Children also see the importance of savings to an economy. They discover, too, that it is vital that people have faith in their nation's currency. The teacher's guides accompanying the cartoons sometimes suggest role-playing by the children as a good method for clinching understandings.

Pioneer programs in economics for the primary grades, such as the one in Detroit, indicate the growing success of an exciting dimension of the curriculum.

Political Science

The work of Professors David Easton and Robert Hess of the University of Chicago has placed renewed emphasis on

³ Lawrence Senesh. "The Economic World of the Child." *Instructor* 73: 7-8; March 1963.

the role of the early school years in citizenship education. A five year national study of 12,000 children conducted by Easton and Hess has resulted in some conclusions which should have a powerful impact on curriculum. This research indicates that the formative years in political orientation (knowledge, opinions and values concerning the political world) are those between ages three and thirteen. It is concluded that such orientation begins through the family before the child enters school, and that it is largely accomplished by the time the child reaches senior high school age.

According to Easton and Hess,⁴ prominent in very young children is the concept of authority. For example, the child of five to eight has a very positive image of, and attachment to, the President. He attaches the same image he has of the office to the person of the incumbent—great power, kindness and goodness. Through his identification with his family, the child rather early becomes attached to a political party. He knows the controversy that surrounds the selection of authority. Easton and Hess also conclude that what youngsters learn about politics is related to religion and internal needs as well as to the family. What is learned at an early age is difficult to displace.

In light of this research, it is alarming that the curriculum for the primary grades rarely includes a study of government and politics. What is included is often incidental, and therefore lacking in planned sequence. Trends resulting from the findings of Easton and Hess are not as yet apparent. Nevertheless, the research provides a strong indication that

⁴ Robert Hess and David Easton. "The Role of the Elementary School in Political Socialization." *The School Review* 70: 257-65; Autumn 1962.

selected basic political science concepts should be introduced as early as kindergarten, with subsequent experience designated to insure that the elementary school does not divorce itself from responsibility for the child's political orientation.

When we examine the voting record of Americans (barely 60 percent of those eligible voted in the 1964 presidential election), it is obvious that something happens to the positive political learnings of the young child by the time he reaches adulthood. The challenge to those concerned with curriculum for the primary grades is clear. We should provide opportunities which: (a) teach youngsters the importance of commitment to the democratic process and of participation in government; (b) build fundamental concepts concerning the rule of law, and the role of government in formulating and enforcing statutes; (c) arouse early awareness of the realities of politics.

History

The deferment theories of the 1930's which still largely prevail today, call for exposing primary grade children to little, if any, history. Perfunctory attention is paid to the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln and to celebrations honoring Columbus and the Pilgrims, but historical studies in depth for grades K-3 are not widespread to date.

However, we are beginning to witness a change. While it is generally agreed that children in the early grades cannot grasp history in its chronological sense, there is a growing acceptance of the notion that the young child can begin to develop an understanding of the "structure" of history. Children of six can carefully explore the community for signs of

recent changes, then begin to look for older landmarks and lore. The essential concept involved is *change*—change as good and bad, change as inevitable and continual. Hopefully, children are led to see that the study of history involves the interpretation of change.

As children of eight or nine begin to examine in depth a time and place in history, the emphasis must be on those aspects with which youngsters can identify: the customs, the food and shelter, the schools and recreation, the transportation. Little attempt is made to place colonial Jamestown or a 19th century western mining community in its proper chronological sequence. At this point, dates are unimportant, but an understanding of the ways in which people once lived is possible and worthwhile for youngsters. Emphasis is also placed on the method of the historian: how he evaluates evidence such as old newspapers, letters, diaries and other types of artifacts in order to interpret history.

Such emphases make a young child's first experiences with formal history both pleasurable and meaningful. The peoples, the places and the events of times past come alive. Children form positive attitudes toward history as a discipline and toward the historian as a scholar whose work can be as exciting as that of an atomic scientist.

In summary, the social studies curriculum for the primary grades has entered a period of great change. Directions and trends already seem to be emerging.

Characteristic of newer courses of study are: (a) more stimulating and exciting content, using as a basis concepts and generalizations recommended by social scientists; (b) greater scope in the program, with the inclusion of material

(Continued on page 343)

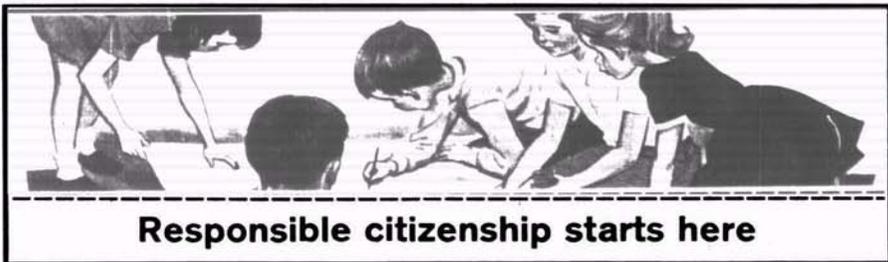
which is obvious improvement. It is safe to say that all change is not progress, but there is little progress without change.

Both radical reformism and long considered judgment are important factors in the social studies. In those social areas in which the answers are not clearly evident and in which empirical data are used to support both sides of an issue, there is a strong tendency toward tug-of-war inconsistency. The schools have felt the brunt of this inconsistency in the social studies curriculum. A pattern which has one basis in the primary grades, changes in the intermediate grades, drifts again in the junior high school, and saunters through the high school without apparent direction produces students who complete the program without knowing what social studies are, and caring even less. Can the social studies afford to continue moving in all directions? There should not be an

inflexible master design encompassing a supreme rationality. Indeed, this would demand the absolute truths which we clearly do not have. We do need, however, a pattern which has a consistent direction evolving as the student matures.

Early Childhood Education—Weaver (Continued from page 299)

from geography, economics, political science and history as well as the more traditional sociology and anthropology; (c) application of Jerome Bruner's "spiral" approach to teaching basic concepts and principles. Also there is a growing consensus that important learnings cannot be left to chance, or to "incidental" teaching. Opportunities must be planned to insure that in the primary grades children begin to build the foundation for the basic understandings so necessary for effective citizenship.



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