

# THE TEACHER AS GENERALIST

**ALICE MIEL**

Chairman, Department of Curriculum and Teaching  
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, New York

NO TEACHER in the swirl of daily classroom events needs to be told that he is a generalist. Others may afford the luxury of turning their personal searchlights on a small section of the educational scene for as long as they please. The teacher must have the whole unfolding plot in mind and must keep the entire stage and all its characters in view. Even as he gives loving attention to the one, he has eyes for the many, who are equally precious human beings. Whether he deals with a single class for most of a day or teaches a single subject to a succession of classes, a teacher cares a lot about the complete education of complete persons.

A teacher is a generalist in another sense also. His daily activities include not only teaching but also administering an instructional space, filled with people and the things of education, so that the space and its contents may be shared pleasantly and efficiently. The activities of a teacher include a certain amount of guidance and supervision, too. Finally, the teacher functions continuously as a developer of curriculum, sometimes as a partner with others in making decisions for a wider group, sometimes alone, deciding *which* of his own pupils will have *what* opportunities for educative encounter that day, that week, that month, that year.

The generalist teacher was never more needed. The past decade has been a useful period of special attention to separate disciplines and their place in education. However, the ultimate payoff of this endeavor can come only as the new knowledge about knowledge is fed into a total curriculum design that helps young people see their whole world. As the president of Teachers College, Columbia University, recently declared:

A suitable strategy of curriculum reform will attack comprehensively the task of relating the parts to the whole of a child's education. . . .

The committees and task forces of specialists in single disciplines whose works have been in many ways exemplary should now be complemented by groups of another type. One of these might represent, instead of the viewpoint of a particular science or a branch of the

humanities, perhaps the position of an average eight year old, or, say, a high school sophomore. It would not ask what is new or most significant in one discipline, but what combination of disciplines, what relative emphases and what allocation of energy would be most likely to help a young person acquire the perspectives, the competencies, the assurances he needs to live a worthwhile life in this century and the next.<sup>1</sup>

The eight year old and the high school sophomore, whose stake in the curriculum is of concern to President Fischer, will be well represented in curriculum planning councils by the generalist teacher. Such a teacher may be expected, in the words of another Teachers College president, to have "the freedom from vested interests to look impartially at the competing claims of various groups of specialists and to balance these interests in terms of the best service to students and society."<sup>2</sup>

The urgency of the need for wholeness in the general society is well put by Odegard, who points to a paradox:

The type of specialization and analysis that has been pulling men and their world apart has at the same time made them everywhere more interdependent. . . . Disintegration through analysis has made fusion and coordination of some kind imperative if we are not to fly apart. Indeed, the rediscovery of a unified sense of direction and purpose has become a matter of life and death, not only for the scholars in the sciences and humanities but also for the human race.<sup>3</sup>

In some ways the term generalist is a misnomer, for the teacher who is to make a contribution to the wholeness of his students is highly specialized—he has special functions not cared for by anyone else and those functions require special knowledge and skills.

### **Special Functions of the Teacher as Generalist**

One way of looking at the special functions of the generalist teacher is to consider the kind of wholeness sought. Goldberg has pointed out that, ". . . for an individual to achieve wholeness and to keep growing in personal, professional, and social wholeness, his knowledge does not have to show that sort of totality which we associate with the compendium, the encyclopedia."<sup>4</sup> Instead, he continues, it is "a psychic wholeness; making for personal, professional, and public self-realization through total integrity . . . , a wholeness that is 'internally originative.'"

Promotion of integration *within* the individual to be educated—helping him

<sup>1</sup> John H. Fischer. "Strategies for Education." Paper delivered at Teachers College Convocation, New York City, June 1, 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Hollis L. Caswell. "Emergence of the Curriculum as a Field of Professional Work and Study." Helen F. Robison, editor. *Precedents and Promise in the Curriculum Field*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1966. p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Peter H. Odegard. "Fragmentation vs. Coordination." *Focus on the Social Studies*. Washington, D.C.: Department of Elementary School Principals, 1965. p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell H. Goldberg. "General Education and the Explosion of Knowledge." *College and University Bulletin*, Vol. 14, No. 9, February 15, 1962.

create order and meaning out of what he encounters in the world—is, then, the responsibility of the generalist teacher. Put another way, the generalist teacher has responsibility for that which may fall between special areas in the curriculum. Mathematics, science, and other established disciplines will never lack friends in court, but who will assume responsibility for the discipline of democracy—the development of the whole array of values, understanding, and behaviors on which our society depends? <sup>5</sup> And who will take responsibility for the discipline of practical judgment—the combining of “grids of knowledge and maps of value” by the “processes of deliberation, decision and commitment”? <sup>6</sup>

Who will care that a young person has had a *good day* at school? Who will help him make sense out of a bewildering set of life experiences? Who will help him diagnose, plan and advance his own learning on all fronts, ranging from relating with others to abstracting something from one experience for transfer to another, and including high order thinking skills and relationships between different orders of knowledge? In short, who will be concerned that a human being is maintaining continuity in his own becoming? <sup>7</sup>

The teacher who assumes such sophisticated responsibilities is functioning as a generalist.

### Developing as a Generalist

To work for an internal type of integration calls on skills already developed to an extent by the generalist teacher. After disappointing experience in the 'thirties with “external” integration (for example, centering the entire curriculum around one topic for six weeks at a time), it was discovered that wholeness of individuals could be maintained and enhanced even though they underwent a variety of experiences in a day or week. Teachers learned how to help students make connections between experiences with different subject matter, different specialists, different types of instructional material.

Today, however, the generalist teacher can bring much more to his role, for there is more to bring. First, work on the nature of various disciplines, though it will never be complete, is far advanced in comparison with that in the 'thirties. Today it is quite possible for the novice to come into teaching already having acquired, in Odegard's words, “not only a reasonable command of the specialized languages of a number of disciplines but also a sense of their interdependence in the study of human condition through space and time.” <sup>8</sup> The experienced teacher

<sup>5</sup> See: Alice Miel and Peggy Brogan. *More Than Social Studies*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957. Chapter 1.

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Broudy. “To Regain Educational Leadership.” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 11: 132-58; Spring 1962. p. 144.

<sup>7</sup> In this connection see: James B. Macdonald. “The Person in the Curriculum.” Helen F. Robison, editor. *Precedents and Promise in the Curriculum Field*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1966. p. 38-52.

See also: Henry Winthrop. “What Can We Expect from the Unprogramed Teacher?” *Teachers College Record*, 67(5):315-29; February 1966.

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

will be able to develop similar competence through individual or group study of useful sources becoming available.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that the generalist must be a master of all fields of knowledge but he does need to be aware of the inter-relationships between different realms of knowledge—"poetics, politics, and physics," to follow Johnson; "investigative, appreciative, and decisive," to follow Schwab.<sup>10</sup>

Second, today's generalist teacher has access to teaching strategies and materials for helping students with basic thought processes transcending any one discipline. Here the work of such persons as Taba, Suchman, and Gagné comes to mind. To become a better generalist, the teacher will seek to test and adapt some of these strategies and materials to meet his personal requirements and he will develop additional ways of his own.

Third, the work of Huebner, in particular, gives the generalist teacher new ways of looking at the totality of classroom events.<sup>11</sup> To apply to the classroom environment and operation such tests as justice and truth, beauty and harmony, technical efficiency and political soundness will suggest dimensions of education and considerations highly relevant for achieving the wholeness with which the generalist teacher is concerned.

Valuable as specialists are, the nurturing of gifted generalist teachers is a worthy occupation for preservice teacher educators and instructional leaders in school systems. It is good that the value of the generalist is again being recognized, for the teacher can help himself to be a more useful generalist as he finds this role in education rewarding and rewarded. ❧

<sup>9</sup>See, for example: Phillip H. Phenix. *Realms of Meaning*. New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, Inc., 1964; Arthur R. King, Jr. and John A. Brownell. *The Curriculum and the Disciplines of Knowledge*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1966; Raymond H. Muessig and Vincent R. Rogers, editors. *Social Science Seminar Series*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Books, Inc., 1965.

<sup>10</sup>Earl S. Johnson. "Patterns for Social Study." *Focus on the Social Studies*, *op. cit.*, p. 13-14; Joseph H. Schwab. *The Scholars Look at the Schools*. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup>Dwayne E. Huebner. "Curricular Language and Classroom Meanings." James B. Macdonald and Robert R. Leeper, editors. *Language and Meaning*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1966, p. 8-26.

Watch for

## The Changing Curriculum:

### SCIENCE

by RICHARD E. HANEY

Prepared for the

ASCD Commission on Current Curriculum Developments

Introduction by PAUL E. BLACKWOOD

Available December

Price: \$1.50

Copyright © 1966 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.