



## Occupational Preparation in the Elementary School



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**A**T CONGRESSIONAL hearings in 1968 on amendments to the Vocational Education Act of 1963, significant testimony was given. One witness stated that it was economically and socially sound to give attention to the growing number of students who do not "fit the system" or are "failed" and leave school. Something, he held, should be done early in the educational lives of students to protect them from the events that keep many of them from achieving acceptable social goals.<sup>1</sup> He was expressing the widespread concern about those students who, yearly, merge into the pool of the occupationally unfit—those who lack skills which render them employable.

Within the context of the total school curriculum, occupational preparation, or vocational aspects of education, may be defined as planned experiences "designed to prepare the learner to enter the world of work successfully or to maintain himself as a productive worker throughout an ever-changing occupa-

<sup>1</sup> National Committee on Employment of Youth. *A Guide to the Development of Vocational Education Programs and Services for the Disadvantaged*. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969. p. 5.

tional life."<sup>2</sup> The strategies used by the school to provide opportunities for needed experiences at the elementary level may have a significant impact upon the pool of unemployed, underemployed, or dissatisfied workers.

The role of the elementary school in preparing pupils for the world of work is described in the following passage:

What is needed now is a developmental system of education. Such a system introduces in the elementary grades awareness of the relationships which exist between schooling and work. . . . In the main the elementary school role is diagnostic and prescriptive. It provides whatever experiences a child may need to make learning real through a continuing examination of how man uses work for self-support, how major occupations employ knowledge, and how productivity is related to a variety of abilities. A major objective of elementary education is to

<sup>2</sup> Gerald B. Leighbody. "Vocational Education." *New Curriculum Developments*. Report of ASCD's Commission on Current Curriculum Developments. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1965. p. 79.

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discover the talents of each child and demonstrate their relationship to the work world.<sup>3</sup>

A review of the current literature uncovers a number of plans and suggestions for enabling the elementary school to achieve this objective. These current beliefs and practices have been reviewed and are organized under the previously mentioned learning experiences in the sections which follow. Evaluative comments in the form of recommendations are then indicated.

## How Man Uses Work for Self-Support

Many different programs resulting from independent efforts and lacking coordination are being tried out and reported. Those with desirable components are readily identified, yet all offer problems of choice to supervisors and teachers who seek a place for them in an already overcrowded curriculum. Decisions must be made about what substitutions, modifications, or additions are feasible.

In general, there are two ways that occupational information is provided. One is to treat work as one of the recurring themes, or generalizations, in selected units centered around activities of people at various locations in time and space. A second method is discussed in the section which follows.

### CURRENT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:

1. Michaelis<sup>4</sup> cites the following work-related theme which is incorporated in units at various levels of instruction: "The work of society is done through groups formed to achieve common goals." This idea may be introduced in kindergarten and expanded in each subsequent grade. For example: Kindergarten—Local Environment Studies Unit includes The Service Station, The Airport, The Store; Grade 1—Family School and Community Life Unit includes Family at Work, Neighbors at Work, Community Workers; Grade 2—Community Studies Unit includes Workers Around the World; Grade 3—Metropolitan Communities includes oppor-

<sup>3</sup>National Committee on Employment of Youth, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>John U. Michaelis. *Social Studies for Children in a Democracy*. Fourth edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968. p. 121.

tunities to develop this idea in relation to government workers. Similar opportunities are suggested in the units prescribed for Grades 4, 5, and 6.<sup>5</sup>

2. Some schools allow the teacher more choice in the development of units. Themes are identified which are the center of course activities. The work-related theme "Man seeks to satisfy his changing needs and desires through work and invention"<sup>6</sup> can be implemented in a series of current units and broadly based curriculum experiences.

## How Major Occupations Employ Knowledge

Teachers tend to be influenced by their own experiential backgrounds in selecting content for presentation to their students. Their own work history is often limited and little or no information is provided in programs preparing teachers for elementary education.

Small wonder, then, that teachers lack consistent treatment of this topic. There is great need to correct this neglect, and to provide a motivational thrust for students who must note extended work options and must recognize direct relationships between competencies which they develop in school and those needed in various occupations. A more direct method of curriculum organization is therefore being investigated. This method stresses the study of occupations and the exploration of work skills as distinct areas of inquiry. Although job obsolescence is an important consideration, it is even more vital for children to ascertain interests and to assess their own potentialities. Topics studied include the importance of the task to society, salary, working conditions, training needed, duties, and relevant educational experiences. Provisions for obtaining these experiences in language, mathematics, science, personal development, and human relations skills are made.

<sup>5</sup>New York City Board of Education. *Curriculum and Materials*. New York: The Board, 1965.

<sup>6</sup>Baltimore City Public Schools. *A Guide to Elementary Education*. Baltimore: Bureau of Publications, 1967. p. 247.

## CURRENT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:

1. A finding of a study which is a part of the *Occupational Information Project* in the Atlanta, Georgia, Public Schools gives reason for reflection. Only ten percent of students interviewed mentioned an education occupation in response to the question, "What kinds of work have you seen people doing?"<sup>7</sup> This clearly shows the need for instilling a heightened awareness of the world of work as a primary objective of the elementary school.

Devised for children in grades three through eight, the project employs television, printed materials, and tapes to help them gain knowledge of themselves and facts about occupations. It is believed that pupils will be motivated to complete high school and seek needed vocational training afterward or vocational training in the event they leave earlier.

2. The New Jersey State Department of Education operates a *Technology for Children Project*. It is a grade-by-grade curriculum which utilizes work-oriented activities. These provide a center for the development of skills in mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies. As they work upon various preplanned episodes, such as preparing a newspaper or producing a television program, children use tools and machines, perform jobs which challenge their interests, and assume responsibility for learning relevant academic tasks.<sup>8</sup>

3. *You and Work* is a representative instructional system. It is a sequence of individualized learning experiences which utilize self-instructional, self-pacing devices (films, slides, and programmed response units). Content, related to five major job families, is categorized as white collar, manual, farm, armed forces, and services. There are 13 subsystems in all. The purpose of the program is informational. It "is based on the

<sup>7</sup> Occupational Information Materials Project. "Children Talk About Work—An Analysis of Interviews with Children." Atlanta: Atlanta Public Schools. (Mimeographed.) Not dated.

<sup>8</sup> Technology for Children Project. "Questions and Answers." Trenton: New Jersey State Department of Education. (Mimeographed.) Not dated.

premise that (elementary) children should be provided with some orientation to the meaning of work and its importance to them and society (even though they) are not ready to make a definite vocational choice."<sup>9</sup>

4. Another approach is to provide children with occupational information about clusters of jobs in selected industries such as television, home construction, a toy factory, and a hospital.<sup>10</sup> As a stimulus for attending school and putting forth effort, youngsters are pictured in simulated activities as they are photographed in adult job situations. Job information in verse accompanies each photograph.

## How Productivity Relates to a Variety of Abilities

Another crucial task of the elementary school is to instill an attitude of respect and appreciation for people whose work contributes to the effective functioning and well-being of society. Needed is the feeling that there is dignity and honor associated with serviceable activity and for the individual who performs it. This attitude is one that is difficult to implement in a society which glorifies leisure, distributes its rewards sparingly, and grudgingly compensates those who provide essentials. We have also neglected the fostering of self-esteem and the nurturing of talents which lie dormant in barren environments. A consciousness of this added responsibility of the school emerges as it girds itself to meet the vocational needs of children with social, economic, emotional, physical, and cultural handicaps.

## CURRENT BELIEFS AND PRACTICES:

1. The development of programs which are responsive to varying abilities must be affected by this observation:

People learn differently. Some do best with the written word as the main learning process;

<sup>9</sup> Gerald Diminico. "You and Work—An Instructional System for Children in Elementary Schools." *American Vocational Journal*, December 1969, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Jean and Ned Wilkinson. *Come to Work with Us Series*. Milwaukee: Sextant Systems, Inc., 1970.

others by handling tools and materials; others by making charts and graphs and using other graphic arts media; still others, through film making and drama. Any of these means or others might be used to teach *any* subject, depending upon the pupil's learning style.<sup>11</sup>

Bearing this in mind, it is apparent that no one program will suffice.

2. Opportunities are provided for visits to various work centers: food processing, water purification, sanitation, newspaper, and television. Community adults are also invited to the classroom to discuss their occupation. The emphasis is upon the workers: the skills and knowledges which they need; positive feelings about their importance; and what the school can do to help.

3. Aptitudes and strengths noted as classroom tasks are performed are identified and communicated to the student by the teacher. Real situations are provided in which individual responses may be tested, diagnosed, and developed. Limitations are more readily accepted when counterbalanced by an awareness of assets. Such understandings assist the child in making tentative decisions about the future.

4. Increasing importance is being attached to the role of the elementary school in discovering the hang-ups of the disadvantaged pupil and the social, economic, and psychological barriers to the realization of his potential. More important, the child must be given help in overcoming these barriers. In this respect, the position of the elementary counselor assumes significance. He acts as a liaison between the child and the school and also relates closely to his home situation. The counselor can also draw upon an array of community resources for special cases: medical and dental services; case work, testing, and psychiatric services; day care or baby sitters; legal services for dealing with police and related problems; and loan and welfare services.<sup>12</sup> Resources of this type must be

utilized in helping some pupils establish necessary psychological supports as they approach adult responsibilities.

## Recommendations and Conclusions

*Function of the Elementary School.* The function of the elementary school is not to achieve closure in occupational identification and selection. Rather, it is to provide many situations in which the individual may develop his potentialities, deepen his interests, and increase his motivation to learn. As he recognizes the operation of school-related skills within various vocational hierarchies, he will gradually identify degrees of fitness with his own inclinations and proficiencies.

Most important is the effect upon attitude—the fostering of aspirations through helping the individual to become knowledgeable of his inner resources which make possible the satisfaction of his immediate wants and, at the same time, suggest future contributions.

*Curriculum Provisions.* Essentially, occupational preparation should be a conscious force in the curriculum from the time the child enters school. The classroom teacher is primarily responsible for arranging conditions which develop attitudes, appreciations, knowledges, and strengthen the self. Some curriculum objectives may be achieved within the group setting. Work orientation may be one of many themes which permeate the class settings with children whose academic goals are long range. These activities are within the province of the regular teacher.

An appraisal of other children may reveal that vocational involvement is more imminent due to academic limitations or socioeconomic factors which impinge upon their range of educational options. For them, classroom activities must be more immediately applicable to the world outside. Still others have special skills which should be developed early and continuously. More direct instruction in occupations and technical skills will be required for them. Flexible arrangements are necessary to assure that none

<sup>11</sup> Marvin Feldman. "Vocational Education in a New Comprehensive System." *Today's Education* 58: 47; November 1969.

<sup>12</sup> National Committee on Employment of Youth, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

will be placed in compartments which limit growth possibilities. No path which will lead to a realistic occupational decision by the student should be blocked. Finally, there are those with personal and emotional problems which must be adjusted. Personnel with special training—industrial arts, social work, counseling, psychological testing, and others—are needed to reinforce and supplement the efforts of the classroom teacher by providing individual attention in such instances.

*Importance of the Teacher.* The teacher, by his example, is in an excellent position to establish a model of personal fulfillment and service by the way he reacts to the child. As

described in captions under pictures of one teacher obviously enjoying her job:

"Happiness is my happy teacher—  
She is doing the work she wants to do—  
Teaching ME—  
and my friends."<sup>13</sup>

Happiness begins for many children as they are revealed to themselves by an accepting teacher. This is an indispensable first step in establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships so important for future vocational success. □

<sup>13</sup> Occupational Information Materials Project. *Happiness Is—My Teacher at Work*. Atlanta: Atlanta Public Schools, 1969.

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