

CURRICULUM PROBLEMS

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New York

THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

1927

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PREFACE

THOUGH always declared to be important, the curriculum of both elementary and secondary schools has now actually become so. After a long campaign, culminating in an astounding climax during the past short generation, educators of the United States have succeeded in leading the people to provide schooling, usually extended well into the period of adolescence, for practically every boy and girl of the nation. In theory at least, and to a significant extent in practice, they have determined the organization that promises the greatest returns. They have so convinced both parents and children of the desirability of education that the persistence of pupils in schools has reached a point unparalleled in history. They have so improved the training of teachers that methods, especially in the elementary grades, are far in advance of any previously known. Through professional training they have become acquainted with changed conditions in social, economic, and political life and with a new philosophy and psychology of education. There is a consequent conviction that sweeping changes in the curriculum

are imperative if the schools are to justify themselves as a wise investment by the State that it may perpetuate democracy and promote its own interests or, in other words, that it may make itself a better place in which to live and in which to make a living.

Students of education are at work on the problem as never before in our history. And in every section of the country committees of teachers and administrators, sometimes assisted by representatives of the lay public, are revising or rewriting curricula and courses of study. This evidence of a realization of need and this activity are good. But there is a disquieting note: from all quarters come appeals for expert guidance; and those who approach expertness are fully aware of the present incompleteness of their knowledge and of the fact that the detailed work must, for real success, ultimately be done by those in the field, constantly directed by facts and principles which they understand and accept. A wise student of society¹ has written: "We must warn ourselves that a little of the ready reliance on the expert comes from the desire to waive responsibility, comes from the endless evasion of life instead of an honest facing of it. The expert is to many what the priest is, someone who knows absolutely and can tell us what to do. The king, the priest, the expert have one after the other had our allegiance, but so

¹ Follett, *Creative Experience*, p. 4.

far as we put any of them in the place of ourselves, we have not a sound society and neither individual nor general progress." What is true of society is true likewise of the curriculum.

Substantial progress toward new curricula and courses of study cannot be made until the problem is considered as a whole, with especial attention to features hitherto neglected. In appreciation of this fact, the following pages have been written. First are presented some questions that are believed to be fundamental to any serious study of the curriculum, questions no one of which has as yet been answered. Some of them have not even received serious general consideration. There may be more than twenty-seven such questions; there certainly are so many. Then follow two chapters on phases of life so important, it is believed, that education cannot afford to neglect them longer.

It may reasonably be asked why constructive answers are not also proposed. There are two reasons. First, the intent of the book is primarily to call attention to the seriousness, the magnitude, and the complexity of the task, and to stimulate many to attempt it. Any answers proposed to the questions, answers such as a real student of the subject must to some extent have, are likely to divert the attention of readers from the questions themselves and from the challenges that they imply. It

is not any one student's answers that are needed but, rather, answers that result from the composite contribution of many who, independently, attempt to solve the problems. Second, to many of the questions no satisfactory answers are as yet possible. There must first be understandings, agreements, experiments almost without number. It will doubtless be many years before we are even reasonably satisfied. Indeed, modification of the curriculum must be as unending as are changes in society and in philosophy. But the length and the difficulty of the task is no reason why fundamental matters shall be ignored. In the volume are stated and implied enough challenges to keep research workers and other leaders of education busy for a generation to come. Of them all, truly professional teachers and students of education should at least be aware, so that their own work may be more intelligent and effective.

Many friends — philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, general educators of several sorts, and administrators — have been kind enough to read the following chapters in manuscript or to discuss with the author the principal matters that are presented. Their patience, kindness, encouragement, and valuable criticism are all gratefully acknowledged. Their names are not mentioned lest they be made to seem responsible for what they may not approve.

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T. H. B.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

THE dominant interests of the teaching profession in our country come and go in waves. Thirty years ago, professional interest, as reflected in educational discussions, concerned itself largely with *methods* of teaching. Beginning about 1910 and culminating ten or twelve years later, the *measurement* of educational processes and products held the focus of attention. And now, quite clearly, it is the *materials* of education that constitute the major field of concentration.

How long this latest wave will last and what will replace it when it begins to subside are questions that need not concern us just now. What should concern us is the task of capitalizing in the service of true educational progress the present widespread interest in the curriculum problem. After all, and quite naturally, there is much in every reform movement that is superficial, much that is evanescent, and much, unfortunately, that represents involution rather than evolution. "Fashions" of interest and enthusiasm have their advantages; they also have their dangers. They are peculiarly prone to confuse mere

change with true progress. In connection with the discussion of educational materials there is an especially vital need for fundamental criteria and standards which, in so far as clear thinking can avail us, will insure that we shall be both "progressive" and "right."

In the present volume, Professor Briggs sets forth some of the fundamental questions for which the serious student of the curriculum problem may well strive to find adequate and consistent answers. These answers will be in the nature of basic criteria and standards of procedure in curriculum building. All students will not answer these questions in the same way, but the effort to answer them should bring into sharp relief the outstanding differences which will then need to be reconciled either by experimentation or by reflective synthesis before extensive programs are carried out on a wide scale.

In his concluding chapters, Professor Briggs does well to emphasize those puzzling factors in human conduct which wield so fundamental an influence and yet which are not easy to isolate and classify. Of late years they have been recognized as important educational outcomes, and the generic term *attitudes* has been applied to them to distinguish them from habits, skills, ideas, meanings, and other more explicit and more easily recognized determinants of conduct. The "emotionalized attitudes" are especially signifi-

cant to education, and these Professor Briggs discusses in a most illuminating way.

The book has been prepared with primary reference to the needs of serious students. Happily the number of such students to-day is far from small. Throughout the country they are at work singly and in groups attempting to reduce to comprehensive and comprehensible terms the tangled and perplexing factors that complicate the processes of teaching and learning. To them, we have every reason to believe, the present volume will bring a fresh stimulus to the sober and sustained thought that the selection and organization of curriculum materials both demand and deserve.

WILLIAM C. BAGLEY

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CURRICULUM PROBLEMS

CHAPTER I

MORE FUNDAMENTAL CURRICULUM RESEARCH

THE fundamental problem in education is the curriculum. What should be taught to a large extent determines the organization of our schools, the buildings and equipment, the methods used, and the value of the schools to the community. Always recognized as important, it has in recent years, because of a changed conception of discipline, become paramount. No superintendent, principal, or teacher can proceed far with intelligent plans — indeed, he can hardly begin them — until he has decided what is to be taught. And yet about nothing in education is less with certainty known.

Although the importance of the curriculum has always been recognized, it is only at long intervals that material changes are made in it. One would not go far wrong in asserting that the history of education is written in terms of these changes in subject matter. Modifications of organization, development of methods, and improvement in buildings and equipment,

however important they seem and are at a given time, sink into the background as progress is seen to be marked by subject matter introduced and adapted to recognized needs. It is interesting and instructive to recall the various efforts that have been made to "reform" education and to see how each of them, though primarily involving subject matter, had greater effect on some physical phase. The academy and the junior high school movements, for example, contributed much to educational progress, but the chief matter in which they failed to achieve the ideals of their proponents was in the curriculum.

For the most part curricula are perpetuated by repetition. It is true that teachers of ability, with especial gifts of independence and invention, constantly make minor modifications of what they teach, some of which slowly become a part of general practice. But these modifications one may say are fortuitous and sporadic. Sometimes they are actual regressions from the general stream of progress. If copied by others, it is because of a novelty of presentation, the vigor of their proponents, or the dissatisfaction with intangible results from other practices. A series of minor eddies has been constant, but the stream is so sluggish as usually to appear a pool. A group of teachers or an individual after long labor presents a new curriculum, but seldom in the past have such efforts done much more than rearrange the

elements, leaving the main body of knowledge much as it was. This "new" curriculum is then more or less widely copied, and there is a complacent illusion of progress.

At present there is general concern about the curriculum. The public to some extent, though inadequately, realizes that changes in the school population and the developments of modern life necessitate corresponding changes in subject matter; and professional school people know not only this but also that current practices are far from being in accord with accepted educational philosophy and proved educational psychology.

As a result, more serious and intelligent study is being given to the subject than ever before in the history of education in the United States. A few scholars are devoting themselves almost wholly to researches in this general field; many more are perfecting studies of subordinate problems — such as the frequencies and difficulties of vocabularies — that furnish substantial contributory materials; still others are developing for special subjects vastly improved courses of study, parts of which slowly but certainly find their way into textbooks; while committees in several states and in numerous cities are by revision or rewriting producing curricula and courses of study which they believe are more nearly suited to the abilities of their pupils and the needs of society.

This current interest and activity, manifested by recent numerous publications in books and in educational magazines, began in the elementary and normal schools, where the problems are relatively simple though extensive and profoundly difficult. It is now extending to secondary schools, largely because of the recent inclusion of a vast army of heterogeneous youth, and to some of our colleges.

Though promising and commendable, these efforts cannot be really successful, however, unless they are based on answers to a number of fundamental questions, questions which are far too frequently ignored. It is the purpose of this chapter to present these questions, that the difficulty of the curriculum problem may be realized and that workers may be directed to the importance of securing answers. It is recognized that every school has its immediate curriculum problems; a decision must be made, even though with inadequate data, as to what shall be taught next semester. This volume contributes little to aid here. With such information as we have, some real advance can be, and is likely to be, made over the traditions. But more important is the direction that the larger changes are to take through prolonged, profound, and progressive research. The material in this volume is presented to help stake out the course that will be followed.

A consideration of the following twenty-seven ques-

tions, the importance of which will, it is thought, be obvious, makes it clear that some of them cannot yet be answered with any degree of positiveness or finality. And yet they must be answered in some way before education can give the satisfaction to society that all expect of it — indeed, for which it is supported. It should prove helpful for all who are concerned with curriculum revision, whether research workers or classroom teachers, to know just what the fundamental questions are and which of them must be decided arbitrarily on the basis of the best judgment of an individual or of a group. It is obvious that different philosophies, whether applied to government or to social relations, will result in different answers. For a number of these there are no “authorities.” It should prove helpful, too, to know which questions must be referred to facts, experimentation, or psychology. If the facts are not known, they may be sought. Even though experiments involve great labor and inconvenience, they may be carried through if the value of their results is demanded; and psychology may be definitely challenged to make practical contributions to meet imperative needs.

The questions are presented with brief comment on each. Some of these questions involve the most profound philosophy of education and of life; all are important. Set down thus briefly, they may easily

fail to impress one as they deserve to do; on the other hand, they may bewilder one who realizes their far-reaching implications. The casual reader will wonder why answers are not proposed. There are two reasons: one is that for many of the questions no satisfactory answers exist; the other is that the purpose of the presentation is not to advocate any theory of education that the author may hold, an advocacy that might easily confuse the issues, but rather to reveal the importance, the extent, and the complexity of the curriculum problem, so that an intelligent comprehensive attack may be made by a large number of educational workers.

I. What are the desired ends of education? — There are scores, perhaps hundreds, of statements of the desired ends of education. Critically examined, they fall into two general classes: the figurative or rhetorical ("What sculpture is to the block of marble, education is to the human soul") and those that attempt to be practically directive ("Education is adaptation to life"; "Education should lead to social efficiency"). The former may sound attractive, but it is doubtful if they ever modified one single detail of the curriculum. Their only value, if they have any, is to fire the imagination or to stimulate the will of a worker.

The directive statements, one can easily see by consideration, differ not only in their emphasis and com-

pleteness but also in their fundamental conceptions. Books have been written to explain and support this, that, or the other conception; but no complete philosophy is held in common or even professed by a majority of educators. It is obvious that a structure must be determined largely by its foundations. It is only common sense to decide what sort of building is desired before laying out the foundations. Without agreement on this fundamental matter one of two curriculum results is inevitable: one who does not decide in his own mind what his foundations are can only tinker with details, the sum of which can never make a satisfactory unity; one who does lay his foundations first, without securing the approval of the majority of his fellows, will erect a structure which they will assuredly disapprove — if they comprehend it. It is too much to hope that all curriculum workers in our democracy will agree on a fundamental philosophy; it is not too much to expect that those who work coöperatively shall prove wherein they hold different views or, what is more important, wherein they agree. If they can unite on one part of the structure, which in all probability is larger than ordinarily suspected, so far the work can be pushed forward to economic common use.

One of the most discouraging phases of the whole problem of curriculum making is the fact that few workers in the field can or will think continuously in