

Priorities in the Educational Program

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THE question of educational priorities becomes increasingly important as contemporary culture becomes more complex and more tasks are thrust upon the school. The identification of priorities is difficult, however, and, in an age of ideological conflict, almost inevitably controversial. Decisions concerning priorities in the school program need to be based on the characteristics of contemporary culture, some conception of ideals and values, and the best available knowledge regarding the nature of individual growth and development and the learning process.

BASES FOR DETERMINING PRIORITIES

Several authorities have contributions to make in the determination of educational priorities. The behavioral scientists can provide information about contemporary society and culture, the nature of individual growth and development, and the learning process. Philosophers can help to identify the values and ideals that the school should further. Members of the educational profession can provide evidence from experience and research on what the school can do effectively. Children and youth can express their needs and interests and help to identify the school objectives they believe to be important. Parents, lay leaders, and other citizens can help to identify the aspects of contemporary culture that they want transmitted and the areas they think need improvement. They can indicate the role they believe the school should serve in cultural perpetuation, improvement, socialization, and personality development.

The ultimate control of public education is in the hands of citizens at the local, state, and national levels. Citizens have the responsibility to participate as broadly as possible in the solution of educational problems. However, the professional competence of educators needs to be recognized and respected. Public education like public health requires a high level of

professional competence. Another point to keep in mind is that the public school is responsible to the whole community and state which supports it. Its function is to serve both the individual and the public welfare. It is vitally important that it should not come under the domination of any special interest group or groups, no matter how powerful.

Some people see conflicts in the determination of educational priorities between academic subject matter and the needs and interests of children, and between the intellect and the emotions and feelings. These are essentially false dichotomies. Needs and interests are stimulated by the environment in which the individual interacts, and needs are usually satisfied and interests pursued only by the possession of knowledge and skill. There are intellectual and emotional factors in all learning situations. An individual is acquiring an attitude toward and a feeling about intellectual endeavor at the same time he is pursuing it. Some people, for example, have learned to dislike history because of the way it has been taught to them.

The task of the school is to make intellectual experiences emotionally satisfying by providing an academically rich and stimulating environment in which pupils become aware of their real needs, develop broad interests, and acquire the knowledge, ideals, skills, and abilities necessary for effective living in contemporary society. In this way the claims of the individual learner, scholarship, and society can all be served.

FUNDAMENTALS OF THE CURRICULUM

In determining educational priorities, it is necessary to answer the question, What are the fundamentals in the curriculum? Some would define the fundamentals narrowly to include only such basic skills as reading, writing, and arithmetic. Others contend that the fundamentals of the curriculum include

all of the elements in the school curriculum which are necessary to the achievement of the essential functions of the school.

Education is the changing of behavior in some desirable direction. Since this is true, the family, church, peer groups, mass media, and school—all serve important educational functions, as does the whole community. The unique thing about the school is that it is a deliberately created and managed environment for the purpose of securing desirable changes in behavior. Schools are the instruments through which cultures perpetuate themselves. They are established and maintained when the members of a cultural group believe that a special institution is necessary to insure the development of the knowledge, ideals, and competence needed to preserve and continue their way of life.

Schools contribute to the preservation and improvement of the culture through the development of the individual. They have the responsibility to guide individual learners in the fullest development of their potentialities, to help them find their places in society, and to develop the competence necessary to fulfill their roles as parents, workers, citizens, and creative human beings, aware of their own inner worth and sensitive to the well-being and rights of others.

The priorities in the educational programs of American schools need to be based on the democratic conception of values and ideals which express the American idea of the good life and set standards for the behavior of the American people. These values and ideals are what we seek to preserve and realize more fully through the school. While there are widespread interpretations of democratic ideals and values, most Americans would agree that they include belief in:

1. The infinite value and sacred dignity of the individual.
2. Equality of opportunity for every individual to develop and use his potentialities.
3. Basic rights and liberties for all.

4. The team method of solving problems based on the cooperation of equals.

5. The use of reason in the solution of problems.

6. The American dream of a better life for all—a faith that if we have mutual respect, equal opportunity, civil liberty, individual initiative, cooperation, and use our reason, we can continue in the present and future to solve our problems and improve our way of life.

The American people seek to maintain these ideals in a rapidly changing industrial-urban culture. Some of the characteristics of this culture are: increasing mechanization, which has produced high standards of living and abundant leisure; a high level of health, which has contributed to a rapid increase in the population and more older people; increasing specialization, interdependence, and centralization; increasing standardization and pressures toward conformity; the dominance of urban and suburban living; the shift from primary to secondary group relationships; limited opportunity for participation by children and youth in the vital activities of everyday living; anonymity and loneliness for many individuals in urban culture; widespread feelings of fear and anxiety; the prevalence of delinquency and crime; and ideological conflict and the threat of communism and fascism to the free way of life.

The priorities for American schools are the characteristics of behavior necessary to maintain and more broadly realize the values of democracy in a rapidly changing industrial-urban culture. These characteristics of behavior can be expressed in terms of knowledge, values, skills, and abilities. The effective individual today requires:

1. An understanding of our changing culture, including the local community, the state, the nation, and the world.
2. High ideals and standards of value, including wide interests, fine appreciations, basic loyalties, and wholesome attitudes.

3. Basic social skills, including reading, writing, speaking, listening, observing, and using numbers.

4. Ability in reflective thinking as applied to economic, political, social, physical, and biological problems.

KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING

In the area of knowledge and understanding, the greatest current need is for an understanding of the meaning of such basic abstract concepts as democracy, freedom, capitalism, fascism, communism, individualism, and the like. Most social action now takes place through participation in secondary groups extending over broad geographic areas. Such participation is largely conceptual, and an individual who lacks operational definitions for key concepts is likely to be manipulated like a puppet on a string by sophisticated shapers of public opinion. Hence, a high priority for the school today is to develop root meanings for the key concepts that are used in decision-making in contemporary culture.

In developing an understanding of our changing culture, there should be a proper balance between the past, present, and probable future. Currently, in most schools, particularly high schools, more attention needs to be given to contemporary events and to the projection of economic, political, cultural, and social trends into the future. There also needs to be a proper balance between the study of the local community, the state, the nation, and the world. Contemporary culture is specialized and interdependent, from the local to the world level, and it is important that the understanding of children and youth encompass the geographic areas, peoples, and cultures of the whole world. In large numbers of schools an emphasis on world history, geography, and culture is neglected. Many high school graduates in the United States still receive no intensive study of world geography, history, and literature beyond the elementary school, and some not even there. Of course there needs to be continued emphasis on and high priority for

local, state, and national geography, history, and culture.

The breadth or scope of the curriculum is an important consideration in the determination of educational priorities. The curriculum consists of a selection of content and experiences from the total range of possibilities in the culture. If the school is to develop competent citizens for today's world, all important aspects of contemporary industrial-urban culture need to be included in the curriculum. Some of the aspects of our culture which have important educational significance are:

1. Improving family living.
2. Developing good physical and mental health.
3. Organizing and governing—developing good citizenship.
4. Developing and intelligently utilizing natural resources—conservation.
5. Producing, distributing, and consuming goods and services—developing vocational and consumer competence.
6. Transporting people and things.
7. Communicating facts, feelings, and ideas.
8. Recreating and playing—using leisure time constructively and wholesomely.
9. Expressing ethical standards—morality and religion.
10. Expressing and appreciating aesthetic ideals—literature, music, and the arts.

VALUES AND IDEALS

In the area of values, the highest priority should be given to the development of democratic ideals, wide interests, and high ethical standards. Democratic ideals should permeate the school environment, and content and experiences from many curriculum areas should be used in developing an understanding of them and in applying them constantly. There should be

continuous mutual respect, equality of opportunity, cooperation, use of reason, and high morale in the school. Pupil-teacher planning should be the basis of classroom work, and there should be the widest participation and sharing of responsibility in the school as a whole. An emphasis on democratic ideals, however, is not enough; there also should be an objective study of communism, fascism, and other ideologies which challenge the free way of life in the contemporary world.

Broad interests and self-dependence in pursuing them are vital to individual competence in a rapidly changing, complex culture. It is impossible for anyone to learn in school all he will ever need to know. Hence, the best thing that the school can do is to develop deep interests in the things that are important in contemporary living and the ability to pursue them self-dependently. This should be accompanied by open-mindedness and a zest for new knowledge and new interests. Instruction that teaches young people to dislike what they are learning is more harmful than helpful.

General Omar Bradley has called the present an age of "nuclear giants and ethical infants." There is evidence on every side of the need for development of higher ethical and moral standards. The school has an important responsibility in this area, but it cannot do the task alone. The development of good character in the young is the responsibility of the family, church, and ultimately of the whole community, as well as of the school. The school needs to work closely with all character-building agencies, especially the family and the church, but the public schools themselves must be kept free from all sectarian influences if the constitutional separation of church and state and freedom of conscience and religion are to be preserved.

SKILLS AND ABILITIES

In the area of basic skills, high priority in the educational program needs to be given to the development of meaning in reading, clarity in descriptive and interpretative writing, the objective discussion of controversial issues, the speaking of foreign

languages, higher levels of quantitative thinking, and the securing of accurate and useful information from listening and observing. The emphasis on word meaning in reading relates to the importance of conceptualization discussed earlier. The need for clear and concise communication through writing is evident throughout contemporary culture, from military briefing to letters to the editor columns in the newspaper. Both the public schools and the colleges need to place more emphasis on practice in writing in essay form.

The ability to discuss controversial issues calmly and dispassionately is one of the greatest needs in our culture. It has been said that much so-called discussion of controversial issues is merely a rearrangement of prejudices. Democracy rests ultimately on discussion and rational persuasion. There is a need for the school to give high priority to practice in the discussion of many kinds of controversial issues and problems.

Ability in the speaking of foreign languages is another important communication need in the United States. Traditionally we have had a large reservoir of speakers of foreign languages provided by immigration. Since the 1920's this source has diminished greatly. If America is to fulfill its leadership role in an interdependent world, the schools need to give much more attention to foreign language instruction.

Another fundamental skill which needs to be stressed is the use of numbers and quantitative thinking. Industrial-urban culture rests on a very extensive mathematical base. Contemporary technology and science cannot continue to exist without a large number of individuals with a high level of mathematical competence. Hence, the schools need to develop not only competence in arithmetical computation but also high levels of ability in quantitative thinking. This is an area of major concern because of the small number of trained mathematicians who are entering public school teaching.

Perhaps the two most neglected basic skills are listening and observing. The typical adult acquires more information about current

affairs from listening and observing than from reading, yet very little is being done to develop listening and observing skills. A beginning is being made in listening under the name of "auding," but practically no systematic attention is being given to the skill of observation at a time when television is rapidly becoming the dominant means of mass communication.

Reflective thinking in all areas is the most important general ability that the school needs to develop. There should be more emphasis on problem-solving throughout the school program. Science and mathematics classes provide excellent opportunities in this area, but much more needs to be done here as well as in applying disciplined thought to economic, political, and social problems. The vast sums being devoted to research in the physical and biological sciences when material change is already far ahead of developments in human relations and moral character are a measure of the high priority that needs to be given to the development of the capacity for social thought in the school.

FREEDOM AND DISCIPLINE

The development of ability in problem-solving immediately raises the question of the place of controversial issues in the curriculum. The effective school program has to include controversial issues: first, because almost all things are controversial at some time; and second, because the consideration of controversial issues is

necessary to the development of effectiveness in critical thinking and to the preservation of a free society. A free society is based on effective free choices by individual citizens, and children and youth can learn how to make effective, informed choices only in schools where they are free to make such choices. Hence, academic freedom exists not primarily for the protection of the teacher, but because it is essential to the maintenance of the free way of life.

In conclusion, self-discipline and self-direction should stand near the top in any consideration of educational priorities in a free society. Discipline is necessary in any kind of group activity, but a democratic society is based on self-discipline rather than imposed discipline. The teacher in the classroom has the responsibility for maintaining discipline, and it must be imposed if necessary. But every effort needs to be made to share responsibility with students through teacher-pupil planning and to encourage students to be self-controlled and self-directing. This is not "soft pedagogy." On the contrary, it is the kind of pedagogy that seeks to have each pupil learn at his highest potential and on his own initiative. This is the kind of pedagogy needed to prepare the individual for life in a rapidly changing, industrial-urban culture where he has the responsibility to help solve pressing problems and where he must keep on learning all his life if he is to be an effective citizen.