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The English Teacher and the Curriculum

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You have a [?] real problem
and need here. Your sug-
gested solutions seem all
to be good. Don't forget
the immediate community
within the larger region.

The English Teacher and the Curriculum

After reading many of the books suggested for 2002 and thinking over the problem: Who makes the curriculum? it has become very clear that the traditional school curriculum is the product of state departments, school boards, and ~~various~~ ^{various} interests and is rarely an outgrowth of the needs of the child himself. If John Dewey's definition of a 'need' is correct, we must get closer to the need of the learner and not what the adult feels is his need.

Before she wrote became an assistant professor of English in the Associated Colleges of Upper New York, she was employed as teacher in the Laboratory Schools of Alabama College, and while there it was her good fortune to take part in one of the most enlightening experiments in her career as an educator; the study made by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools. This study, started in 1936, a few years

after the Eight-year Study of the Progressive Education Association, was conducted along much the same lines as the latter. Thirty-three secondary schools were selected from the eleven Southern states, and an intensive study made of their curricula. Three schools were chosen from each state, and it was the writer's privilege to be on the teaching staff of one of the schools chosen in Alabama. Here she learned at first hand the importance of adapting the curriculum of the individual school to the child and his life and needs in the community and the region.

As a teacher of English, it was her part in the survey made of the entire region served by the school, to formulate, check, and evaluate a questionnaire given to each of the 250 students, to have conferences with them ^{and} their parents, to observe them at school and in social situations, to talk with welfare workers, employers, etc., to consult guidance teachers, teachers of health, psychologists, and finally to make a report concerning

her findings that was incorporated into the General Report made to the Southern Study Commission.

To go into all that was learned is needless. It is to be found in Bulletin No. 2 issued by Alabama College, and in the Report of the Southern Study. Suffice to say that under the old curriculum she had been teaching Spenser, Milton, Keats, and Byron to children who would never go to college, but whose work lay in mining, tenant-farming, mechanics. She was teaching Chaucer to pupils who had as much as they could do to learn basic twentieth-century English. She was teaching Shakespeare to many who had never seen a play, and she was completely ignoring, because it had never been taught in schools, the vast amount of regional literature that dealt with just such economic problems as they faced every day and were familiar with: the tenant farmer, racial prejudice, superstition, life on the farm and in the village, the one-crop system, the problem of fanatical religion, the problem of mixed blood, poverty, illiteracy - to any other

With our eyes at last opened, we (the faculty of the Laboratory Schools of Alabama College and the University of Alabama and the Hattis School) each went to work on a new curriculum that would fit the pupils we served. With the aid of three summer workshops conducted by the Southern Study, and the invaluable help of the survey, the writer went to work on the English curriculum. The course in Shakespeare, Milton, Chaucer, and the Romantics was left in for those who intended going to college. Units in Family Life, Labor, Propaganda, the South, etc. were set up. One of the new units was on Minority Groups, worked out in the summer of 1939 with Dr. Lemmon Gray in a workshop conducted by Teachers College at Sarah Lawrence College. Starting with a complete lack of understanding of other peoples, the Negro in particular, we made an intensive five-month study of the contribution of the Negro race to art, music, literature, drama, sports, law, education, medicine, science, etc. The writer gradually saw the awakening of appreciation to the real value of the race, and when the visit culminated in a trip by bus to Tuskegee Institute seventy miles away, it marked the beginning of

a new era of Johnson, in the part of the pupils, for the Negro.

In all of these units much reading, discussion, observation were required. Carefully worked out bibliographies were a necessity, and the teacher acted as guide, organizer, and adviser.

The real problem lies in finding the pupils needs and in fitting the curriculum to them and the community. If the several State departments ^{would} realize the value of this, and let the individual schools plan their ~~own~~ programs with the help when needed of experts, the students would profit greatly.

Regional problems have long been a great source of interest to the human geographer, the ecologist, the anthropologist, the sociologist, and of no less interest to the storyteller. He it is who gives them life. He takes the same problem with which the sociologist is involved, isolates it, reorganizes it, and presents it in an episodic way by means of dialogue, plot, conflict, and action. It is read by a vast audience, and if it is well written, the lesson remains long

after the story has been read, and when enough people become motivated by the urge (the need or dynamics) of the problem, something is done about it.

The teacher of English acts as the interpreter. She it is who guides the pupil into seeing the problems in literature, who helps him see these conflicts with an unbiased mind, who helps him to see both sides of the question, and leads him toward a solution.

Certainly much of the solving of these problems will have to come by legislative action, but what better start can be made toward this than by the education of an enlightened electorate, and what better time to begin than when the students are passing through that impressionable stage - adolescence?
These are needs - real needs of the people of the South, and it seems much more advisable for the teacher of English to lead her students ^{to see} the problems of regionalism that are a major part of their lives than to spend her time delving into the vague imagines of The Faerie Queene or the weird supernaturalism of Edgar Allan Poe.

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