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Chapter Four

Citizenship Education and the Slow Learner

Charles K. Curtis

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss citizenship education for slow-learning students and to propose one approach that might be employed in classes for these students at the secondary level. The intent is not to provide a definitive statement—if, indeed, such a statement were possible—to resolve once and for all the numerous problems in this area. In fact, it is likely that more questions will be raised than answered.

A brief description of the population of concern is in order. Presently, a number of terms are used to refer to slow-learning, non-academic, and non-regular program students in today's schools. Many of these expressions are ambiguous, misleading, psychologically unsound, value-laden, and, to the students to whom they refer, probably quite embarrassing. Although initially these terms were conceived so that a particular school population might be more precisely identified (and thus their educational needs more adequately met), the proliferation of terms that currently exists serves only to add confusion to an already ambiguous system of categories. Recent perusals of the literature have revealed that, whereas "disadvantaged," "culturally deprived," and "ghetto youth" described discrete student populations when first introduced, these terms, along with "terminal students," "educationally-subnormal," "somewhat backward," "socially disadvantaged," "alienated," "inner-city children," "slum children," "minority pupils," "educationally deficient," "undereducated," and "slow learners" are now being used to describe similar populations of students (Passow & Elliot, 1968, p. 3; Storen, 1968, p. 3; Weber, 1974, pp. 18–19). Regardless of the ways in which the terms are used, however, it is reasonable to assume that within each group of students will be a number to whom the original connotation of the word "slow learner" would have applied. While, no doubt, an argument contesting the practice of classifying students according to the criteria implied by these categories could be developed (see Nimnicht & Johnson, 1973), classification systems are part of the educator's tool bag; they continue to exist because, if properly used, they have a certain utility for curriculum planning.

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Nevertheless, it is with some reservation that the students with whom this chapter is concerned are described as "slow learners," a term popularized by, among others, Abramowitz (1959, 1963, 1968, 1970), Ingram (1960), Johnson (1963), Abraham (1964), and Shelton (1971). Generally these students are characterized as possessing below average intelligence, as experiencing difficulties with conventionally taught subjects, and as having poorly developed reading skills. Additionally, as a group, these students may record a greater number of absences from school and may be more subject to breaches of school discipline than students in academic programs. Furthermore, continued failure to achieve academic success may have resulted in lowered self-esteem and a decreased sense of worthiness, particularly in the school environment.

According to some estimates (for example, Tansley & Gulliford, 1960, p. 6; Telford & Sawrey, 1967, p. 196), perhaps one-fifth of the school population might be categorized as slow learners. The proportion of slow learners to regular program students in a particular school population may vary depending upon the nature of the community from which the student population is drawn. There is a tendency for the number of students manifesting the characteristics of slow learners to be higher in schools whose students come from low socio-economic areas and to be lower in schools located in affluent middle-class communities. Presently, both in the United States and Canada, slow-learning students are enrolled in special work-oriented programs, in classes of the regular program especially composed of low-achieving and reluctant students and usually designated as "adapted," "modified," or "x" courses, and, though perhaps less commonly, in integrated academic classes. When enrolled in integrated classes, slow-learning students tend to be somewhat older than their classmates.

Objectives of Citizenship Education

Citizenship education has long been considered by special educators to be an important aspect of the social studies program for slow learners. The primary goal of the citizenship education program for slow-learning students is in accord with that for the regular social studies program: to prepare students for responsible, involved citizenship in a democratic society. Despite this common aim, however, the characteristics of the "model" citizen described by social studies educators bear little similarity to the qualities of good citizenship described in the literature regarding the slow learner.

An examination of a number of articles and books[1] relating to citizenship education and written during the past half-century revealed that the attribute most frequently ascribed to the model citizen was that he or she possess a reasonable knowledge of his community's economic, social, and cultural problems and that he or she be committed to their resolution. The adherence to a belief in the equality of individuals and the manifestation of a concern for the constitutional rights of all citizens ranked second in the lists of characteristics. Other characterizations of the good citizen, in order of frequency, were: respect for law and order in society; open-mindedness to the opinions of others and receptiveness to new facts; appreciation for both the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and possession of the decision-making skills requisite for effective participation in the democratic process.

In contrast to the preceding, for the slow learner the primary attribute of good citizenship was that he or she be gainfully employed and possess acceptable work habits. The second most frequently mentioned criteria were that he or she respect and obey the law and have a rudimentary knowledge of local statutes. A third commonly stated characteristic was that the slow-learning adult should share in the "responsibility" for the quality of life in the local community. Responsibility was variously interpreted to include: accepting responsibility for one's own family; maintaining the house and furnishings in a good state of repair; respecting a neighbor's property; treating neighbors in a courteous manner; helping to keep the neighborhood clean, quiet, and orderly; and, returning borrowed articles.

A comparison of the two sets of descriptions suggests a marked contrast in expectations. Whereas the citizen educated in the regular program is to be socially aware, sophisticated and capable of dealing with the problems of society, while manifesting a mature, unselfish concern for the welfare of his fellows, the graduate of a program for slow learners is to demonstrate good citizenship by being an employed, law-abiding, non-disruptive member of the community. Indeed, while descriptions of the model citizen imply a faith in the democratic ideal of participation, by implication it would seem that the expectation of some educators has been that the slow learner not become an encumbrance on the rest of society. This position was succinctly expressed by Kolstoe (1970, p. 28) when he wrote that good citizenship for mildly retarded adults would be exercised "largely by not becoming burdens on society, rather than by positive civic activities."

[1]For example: Washburn (1933, pp. 124–138); Quillen & Hanna (1948, p. 60); Crary (1951); Carpenter & Spieseke (1953, pp. 1–18); Wesley & Wronski (1958, p. 78); Roselle (1966).

Citizenship Education Programs

A somewhat similar contrast was disclosed when the course content of a variety of high school citizenship education programs[2] for both groups of students were compared. As Newmann noted in Chapter One, citizenship education in American schools (and, to some extent, Canadian schools also) has been organized around a variety of approaches. Among the most frequently described programs for achieving the goals of citizenship education have been those consisting primarily of a study of the growth of democracy in the United States. Programs centered on the historical study of the evolution of democracy are based on the assumption that the appreciation of democratic ideals and the comprehension of democratic institutions and processes are promoted by the knowledge of their historical development. Occupying a position of importance in citizenship education similar to that of history are the traditional civics programs in which the organization of municipal, state, and federal governments, the election processes and the responsibilities of elected representatives, and the domains of the several levels of government are studied.

The influence of Jerome Bruner was reflected in many social studies programs developed during the last decade. Though citizenship education remained a primary concern of social studies educators, social studies was defined to include instruction in the concepts and inquiry modes of history and the several social science disciplines. Lately, values education programs have begun to make an impact on citizenship education.

Little concern for the latter approaches to citizenship education could be found in the writings of special educators or social studies curricula for slow-learner programs. In addition to simplified history and government curricula modeled after the aforementioned courses, slow-learning students in secondary schools have been offered a fare that included lessons on patriotism, national symbols, holidays and traditions, and famous citizens. Furthermore, studies concerned with inculcating the student with a sense of responsibility for himself and his family, with making and keeping friends, with accepting community responsibilities, with the use of leisure time, with the role played by religion in society, and with occupational preparation have been common occurrences in classes for slow learners. In one large metropolitan area, the students in a secondary slow-learner program were taught to "dispose of their garbage properly," to turn off light and water faucets, and to "feed birds and help protect their [the birds'] needs."

Comparisons such as these suggest that a sizable number of educators doubt that most slow learners will play any more than a passive

[2]References available from the author upon request.

role in the political life of their community or nation. Such a view raises serious questions about our commitment to the concept of participatory democracy, a commitment highly espoused by both American and Canadian societies. It seems ironic to note that when the nation is threatened with war, no one doubts the capability of men and women who may have been designated as slow learners during their school years to serve their country. In time of national crisis, we fail to see the relationship of participatory citizenship to intelligence.

Assumptions Basic to Many Citizenship Education Programs for Slow Learners

Consider for a moment some of the basic assumptions that, either intentionally or unintentionally, seem to have significantly affected citizenship education for slow learners. As mentioned earlier, the first and probably the most important assumption seems to be that, when slow-learning students reach adulthood, they will play, either by choice or circumstance, an inactive part in the decision-making processes in their community. The validity of this belief has seldom been challenged in the literature. Perhaps, at least in part, it results from educators' experiences with slow learners in social studies classes. Their apparent lack of interest in the social studies has been well documented (see, for example, Dimitroff, 1965, p. 188; Frerichs, 1969, p. 213; Strom, 1965, p. 87; Curtis, 1972). Whether or not it is sound practice to infer future citizenship behavior from students' attitudes toward social studies is open to question. If, however, many adults previously identified as slow learners do accept a passive role in the affairs of the community, it may be that the limited expectations for slow learners and the simplified, often childish curricula they experience in the schools inhibit their desire and ability to function effectively as democratic citizens.

A second assumption that seems implicit within the description of the attributes of good citizenship for slow learners is that they are not to be expected to make rational decisions about the problems of their society. This belief presumes that slow learners lack the intellectual faculty to understand the nature of such problems and to make reasonable evaluations of proposed courses of action that might be taken to ameliorate them. It is relevant to note here that there is little evidence to suggest that slow-learning adults (if, indeed, they may be referred to as such once they leave school) are any less able than the majority of other citizens to comprehend and form sensible opinions about the problems facing society. After monitoring radio "hot-line" broadcasts in Vancouver, British Columbia, for a number of years, I have concluded that when no particular scientific expertise was required to understand a specific problem, and when syntactical and grammatical errors were overlooked, the opinions expressed on the

air by many interested, knowledgeable, but uneducated persons were not essentially different in quality from those expressed by many obviously bright and articulate persons.

American and Canadian societies purport to prize rationality. Particular emphasis is placed on intelligent decision-making behavior at the polls. Although we may often assume that, as adults, slow learners will be less competent and qualified voters than will average and bright pupils, sufficient evidence to support the argument that slow learners vote less intelligently than the great majority of the population could not be found in the literature. Indeed, is there any empirical data that imply that the patterns of voting behavior for slow learners are in any way different or unique? Again, my experience with the "hot-lines" suggests that, during any provincial or federal election in Canada, persons who (as indicated by the quality of their speech and the manner in which they express themselves) might earlier have been in classes for non-academic students will, depending upon the nature of the issues being discussed, express opinions that indicate support for an array of programs that range from the political right to the left.[3]

Certainly, one may question the assumption that slow learners as adults are any less able to deal with the complexities of societal problems (at the level at which citizens are reasonably expected to handle the issues involved in the problems) than are graduates from regular programs. With the possible exception of two studies reported thirty years ago (Gates, 1946; Pace, 1949), large-scale political socialization research has continually failed to produce evidence that graduates from high school programs are adequately prepared to rationally consider problems and issues in contemporary society (Melbo, 1936; Wilson, 1938, pp. 84–89; Langton and Jennings, 1968; Bagby, 1974; Sanstead, 1975). Following a study of the research conducted prior to 1963, Newmann (1963) concluded that few citizens are interested in, or have any knowledge of, their community's affairs, that a large number of voters fail to "perceive the candidates' stands on various issues," that a substantial percentage of the adult population does not exercise the franchise, and that politically concerned persons tend to associate with groups that "reinforce" their views. And there is some evidence that suggests that intelligence might not be a significant factor in this area. Price (1951) reported research studies conducted with

[3]It is interesting to note that during its brief period as the Government of British Columbia, the socialist New Democratic Party had the avowed support of the blue-collar unions while at the same time it had a greater number of university-educated members than the other four parties collectively. Quite obviously, education was less a factor in party selection than other variables. Only to the extent that a general lack of education affects the kinds of vocations open to slow learners, with the possible result that many slow learners may have similar economic and political concerns, is it probable that education (and, perhaps, intelligence) has any effect upon voting behavior.

large groups of very bright to superior secondary school students that led to the conclusion that a great majority of the students possessed a "serious lack of social sensitivity concerning community problems and a startling absence of community citizenship experience."

One might also question whether there is reason to believe that a positive relationship exists between intelligence and attitude toward basic democratic freedoms. Investigations conducted at Northwestern University (Mack, 1956) and Clark University (Nash, 1959) disclosed that a large measure of disagreement about fundamental rights existed among supposedly bright college students. In what may well be the only large-scale survey that attempted to compare the attitudes of "dull-normal" students (enrolled in the senior secondary grades) with "superior" students, no significant difference was noted in the patterns of the responses of the two groups to questions that had them indicate whether they would deny civil liberties to certain deviant or controversial members and groups in their community (Scoval, 1962).

There appears, then, to be reason for questioning the basic assumptions upon which many citizenship education programs for slow learners have been developed. It may be that we have been operating for too long on suppositions for which we have insufficient empirical evidence. By so doing, we may have severely narrowed the scope and lessened the quality of the experiences offered to slow learners in the citizenship education program. Without data that give credence to these assumptions, we should set them aside and accept our commitment to prepare slow-learning students for active citizenship in their community. This is not meant to suggest that we ignore the qualities of citizenship that have been advocated for slow learners. There is no reason to quarrel with objectives that are concerned with adequate vocational preparation and the development of citizens who accept responsibility for maintaining themselves and their families, and who attempt to live peacefully with their neighbors. These are commendable objectives for all students. My contention is that until the citizenship qualities of slow learners are enlarged to encompass the characteristics now reserved for the model citizen described earlier, they fall short of an acceptable goal. If we are to err in our expectations for slow learners, it seems more in keeping with our concept of democracy to aim too high, rather than too low.

Preparing Learning Experiences

Before we examine one approach that seems to be appropriate for use with slow-learning students in high schools, some consideration must be given to learning styles. It is difficult to talk with any great amount of certainty about the learning styles of slow-learning students. In fact, it is probable that the methodologies suitable for these students are the same as those that are effective with students in the academic program.

According to comments made in the literature (by, for example: Featherstone, 1951, p. 43; Magnifico, 1958, p. 129; Ingram, 1960, p. 217; Johnson, 1963, p. 312; Karnes, 1970), social studies presented in special education classes should be organized into small, concise units of study and taught in a fairly structured classroom environment in a manner that provides for numerous concrete, firsthand experiences. Moreover, some special educators have contended that social studies is most successfully taught when a wide diversity of learning experiences is utilized and provision is made for practice, repetition, and review. The importance of making instruction concrete through the extensive use of field studies, community resource persons, and audio-visual materials as means for encouraging active student participation has often been mentioned. Classroom teaching techniques such as role-playing, creative dramatics, socio-drama, and debate have also been suggested in the literature as being suitable and effective methods for involving students in a particular study. Furthermore, using group and committee work as means for furnishing democratic experiences in group leadership, in the acceptance of responsibility, in the resolution of differences of opinion, and in group planning is also widely advocated.

Again, certain basic assumptions have been made concerning the nature of the slow learner. As a group, slow learners are portrayed as living in a world of concrete objects, rather than abstract ideas (McFeely, 1944, p. 64; Heck, 1953, pp. 329–347; Nickel, 1957, p. 373). Because of this, they are seen to possess a greater faculty for learning by "seeing" and "doing" than for learning through the development and application of abstract generalizations. In the same vein, they are described as learning best when they are active, involved participants in the study (Conovitz, 1939; Schmidt, 1942; McLendon, 1965, p. 246), rather than passive observers, the role too often required of students in regular classes. Additionally, slow learners are considered to have limited powers of concentration (Tansley & Gulliford, 1960, p. 169; Garton, 1961; Northam, 1961), and this quality is said to be manifested in an attention span—at least in the classroom—that is decidedly shorter than that of their peers in the regular program. As a consequence, slow learners are said to become restless, bored, and uninterested, and to misbehave as they quickly tire of the activities of a particular class period. The literature also characterizes the slow learner as having a narrow range of interests (see Utley, 1961).

Suitable content for the social studies program in slow-learner classes has also been described in the literature. Generally, educators have recommended that the content should be selected from the contemporary scene, should have a "here and now" quality, should provide direct contact with reality, and, at least during the initial stages of the study, should be related to the everyday experiences of the stu-

dents (Winterbourn, 1944, p. 165; Waite, 1971, p. 103; Schwartz, 1975, p. 27). Perhaps Webster's (1966, p. 586) comment that content for the social studies program should not be "far removed from the realities of life in both time and space" best describes the criteria that are said to determine suitable course content in social studies programs for slow learners. In addition to the plea for content that is current, authentic, and topical, it should be relevant to the needs and experiences of the students (Carl, 1970; Hartmann, 1970).

As with the previous assumptions, the validity of these assumptions about learning needs to be examined. Presently, our knowledge of the kinds of learning experiences that are appropriate for slow learners in social studies classes is limited, consisting primarily of the observations of classroom teachers. In addition, usually only those lessons that have gone particularly well are reported in the journals. This would appear to be a field that is ripe for experimentation.

Several problems seem to be inherent in some of the suggestions made for planning learning experiences for slow learners. First, if we adhere too closely to them and limit our teaching to the "concrete" and avoid abstractions, we may exclude the development and application of useful generalizations, an important aspect of social studies instruction. Second, because of a concern for the alleged "short interest spans" of slow learners, we may be inclined to offer them brief, superficial, discrete units of study that fail to provide for in-depth investigations or for the development and practice of particular skills (e.g., of critical thinking) that require extensive repetition and application if they are to be learned, even at an elementary level. Third, to adhere too closely to these suggestions may result in the overuse of audio-visual materials and the near total exclusion of newspapers, magazines, and other kinds of print materials from the social studies class.[4]

Despite the impoverished state of research in this area, we can be reasonably confident that slow learners—and, indeed, perhaps most students—will profit from instruction that attempts to actively involve them in the learning experiences. Additionally, selecting content that has meaning to the students and that they can accept as being relevant to their lives and education should be an effective approach with both slow learners and academic program students.

Although not frequently referred to in discussions of social studies

[4]The tendency to minimize reading in the social studies class has been noted by, among others, Jarolimek (1967, p. 168) and Dempsey (1972, p. T7). Opposition to this practice was voiced by Abramowitz (1963), who cogently argued that to attempt to avoid the reading problems of slow learners by employing non-print materials was, in fact, merely to beg the issue. Indeed, he contended, the social studies program should "address itself" to the problem, and social studies teachers should feel obligated to provide instruction designed to increase the reading skills of all their students.

instruction for slow learners, a study reported by Rosenberg (1962) has some bearing on the topic. Following a rather extensive investigation of adolescent self-image, Rosenberg concluded that a relationship existed between self-concept and interest in public affairs. On the basis of this relationship, Rosenberg postulated that people with low self-concepts tended not to discuss public affairs as often as those with high self-concepts. Such a condition was probable, he suggested, because of the "threat" posed by the possibility that one's opinions might be scorned or ignored, and because people with low self-concepts are "doubtful that they have anything worthwhile to contribute." Concern for the development of satisfactory self-concepts has long been espoused by special educators. This concern has particular significance for social studies teachers of slow-learning students. In order for citizens to function effectively in their community to exercise any control over their existence, they must be aware (at least to some extent) of the problems of their society. Attempting to change self-concepts by utilizing learning strategies designed to provide students with successful experiences would seem to be appropriate pedagogy in slow-learner classes.

The Investigation of Contemporary Community Problems

If we return for a moment to the qualities that characterize model citizens, inferences can be made about the specific skills and attitudes they probably possess. Reading skills, for example, are implied in the statement that each "possess a reasonable knowledge of his community's . . . problems." Although television will probably continue to play an important role in informing us of significant events as they occur, newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and so forth often provide a greater variety and depth of information, and they have an advantage over television in that they can be read and pondered at one's leisure. Moreover, in order to deal intelligently with all the information that they receive, and to make rational decisions on the basis of it, citizens must possess, at least to a rudimentary degree, the skills of critical thinking. If, as described, model citizens are committed to the resolution of societal problems, they should know of the various actions one might take to effect change in a democratic manner. Among the attributes our citizens ought also to possess are a belief in their own worthiness and a degree of confidence adequate for discussing their points of view with others, a receptiveness to the opinions of others, and a tendency to espouse basic democratic rights for all persons.

If we direct our instruction toward the development of these skills and attitudes that (along with others) help to define the model citizen, then our claim that we are concerned with educating slow learners for effective participation has more substance than if we limit our prima-

ry objectives to preparing students with occupational skills. Such a proposal, however, raises many questions, such as:

(1) What are effective pedagogies for increasing slow learners' awareness of societal problems?
(2) Does the awareness of societal problems lead to an interest in investigating them?
(3) Does a commitment to the resolution of contemporary problems result from an awareness of the problems?
(4) To what extent can slow-learning students be taught critical thinking skills?
(5) What degree of critical thinking skills is necessary for evaluating the data relevant to a particular problem and for weighing proposed alternative solutions to the problem?
(6) Do persons with special training in critical thinking tend to employ these skills to think rationally about public issues?
(7) What strategies are appropriate for increasing reading skills in social studies classes for slow learners?
(8) Does the development of reading skills lead to increased interest in reading, particularly of newspapers and magazines?
(9) What learning experiences can be provided to increase self-concept, reduce dogmatism, and positively affect attitude toward basic civil rights?

It is not our purpose, nor are we presently able, to provide adequate responses to all of these questions. Several, in fact, are not limited to the domain of the special educator. The questions are suggested because they are germane to the development of a rationale for including the study of community problems in slow-learner social studies classes at the secondary level.

During the past several decades, a large number of articles advocating student investigation of contemporary problems and the issues implicit within the problems have been published. A review of this literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. In general, however, arguments in favor of including such studies in the social studies curriculum have centered around the need for citizens to be informed about the problems of their society and around the right of students in a democratic state to investigate them in the classroom. Additionally, educators have contended that the investigation of contemporary problems provides the training most suited for preparing students to cope with these problems once they leave school.

The few references to the study of contemporary problems in social studies classes for slow learners suggest that the literature in this area has failed to generate much interest among special educators. Nevertheless, there appears to be no valid reason for excluding slow learners from the population to whom the arguments favoring the examination of social problems apply. Interestingly, the strongest positions taken by special educators writing in this area have been rebuttals of the charge that students in special programs for non-achievers lack the degree of sophistication necessary to deal satisfactorily with social problems. The arguments that they have presented are relevant primarily to slow-learning students in "disadvantaged" schools.

In responding to the comment that including social problems in special education curricula is not good practice, Gross (1952) insisted that where students have been helped to understand the relationships of particular problems to their lives, they have "managed successfully" to investigate them. Papero (1970) contended that since disadvantaged children encounter poverty, drug addiction, crime, and discrimination daily in their environment, the school has the obligation to assist them in understanding the issues involved in the various problems. Ornstein (1966, p. 287) suggested that including the examination of societal problems within the social studies programs for these pupils indicates to them that the school is "aware of the problems" and is concerned about their amelioration. He believed that by ignoring community problems in the classroom, the school "enters into a tragic conspiracy of irresponsible retreat from reality."

An additional argument for including the study of contemporary problems in classes for slow learners is related to the nature of such studies and to assumptions of what constitutes good pedagogy in special classes. Certainly, the investigation of community problems satisfies the criterion that content in slow-learner classes should have a "here and now" quality. The investigation of these problems provides the student with a "direct contact with reality," and, if properly selected by the teacher or if chosen by the students, the problems may have particular relevancy to their lives. Moreover, through the use of field studies and resource persons, the students can be furnished with a variety of concrete, firsthand experiences.

Returning to a consideration of the questions posed previously, one effective strategy for developing the slow learner's awareness of societal problems is to include the study of such problems in the social studies curriculum. This comment is not as obvious as it first might appear. It is entirely possible that a group of students might thoroughly investigate several problems in their community and still be relatively uninformed about others equally as significant. Some evidence, however, can be provided (Curtis, 1977) that suggests that the study of a single problem over a period of several months can have a startling effect on student awareness. Prior to an investigation of housing as a social problem, the students in several non-academic secondary classrooms were asked to identify important problems in the community. The combined lists for the classes contained only four topics: jobs (but not the problem of unemployment), inflation, pover-

ty, and housing. When a similar request was made following the completion of the study, most students' lists identified at least nine or ten significant problems, while the combined lists totaled twenty-four. (The students in these classes manifested an awareness of community problems that I have not yet witnessed in the senior academic grades.) Furthermore, each of the fifty-four anonymous respondents to a questionnaire administered subsequent to the completion of the project study expressed the view that studies of these problems were important to their education and should occupy a prominent role in the social studies program. Whether this awareness of and apparent interest in community problems led to a commitment to their resolution is unknown. At any rate, during the period of the project, students were heard to remark that these problems—particularly the lack of adequate housing facilities for middle- and low-income families—threatened the quality of life in their community and something should be done to resolve them.

The study of community problems provides a vehicle for developing lessons designed to teach critical thinking skills in slow-learner classes. The perusal of a large number of articles dealing with critical thinking revealed the existence of a general consensus among the authors that content for teaching critical thinking skills should be selected from contemporary societal issues and problems. The paradigm most often recommended for investigating community problems and for developing critical thinking skills was the inquiry model, with variations by Dimitroff (1965, p. 194), Chernow and Chernow (1973, p. 172), and Curtis (1974). Appropriate materials suggested for teaching critical thinking are those that are commonly mentioned for studying contemporary problems: newspapers, magazines, radio and television programs, questionnaires, and interviews with community resource people. Critical thinking could be encouraged most frequently during the analysis of data phase of the inquiry model.

Although a paucity of research exists in this area, there is some evidence to support the claim that slow learners can be taught critical thinking skills (Case & Fry, 1973). To what extent these can be taught remains unknown. (Nor does it appear that anyone has yet attempted to determine what degree of critical thinking is suitable for understanding the data associated with community problems.)

Beyond providing a suitable model for investigating contemporary problems and for teaching and practicing critical thinking skills, an inquiry approach has several other advantages when used with slow learners. In one sense, each step of the model may be viewed by students as a short unit of study, even though the investigation of a particular problem may continue for several months. To some extent, this may satisfy the criterion that acceptable pedagogy with slow learners involves arranging the content into brief units. The clearly

defined stages or steps of the inquiry model provide a structure or framework for presenting certain activities at specific points in the study in a logical sequence that can be understood by the students. Discussion and evaluation of the evidence relating to a particular problem provide an opportunity for argument and debate, while dramatics may be an effective method for encouraging the students to examine the feelings of people involved in the problem. In addition, an inquiry approach offers opportunities, both at the collection and analysis of data stages, for group and committee work.

The kinds of materials usually available for studying community problems may be suitable for encouraging interest in reading and for developing reading skills in slow-learner classes. There seems to be a general consensus among special educators that a successful reading program for adolescent slow learners in the secondary school depends less on the teaching of phonics, the broadening of sight vocabulary, and the refinement of word analysis skills than on the development of proper attitudes toward reading (Johnson, 1963, p. 209; Tansley & Gulliford, 1965, pp. 140–141; Weber, 1974, pp. 80–81). Strategies for changing negative attitudes toward reading have been described by several educators. Weber (1974, p. 83), for example, suggested that slow learners' attitude toward reading changes when the need to solve a problem provides them with valid purposes for reading. Williams (1970, p. 69) argued for the importance of providing slow-learning students with reading materials that had "functional significance," while Hawkins (1972) developed an individualized reading program for an undereducated black youth that combined the use of interesting materials with the need to learn. Certainly the study of contemporary problems can furnish numerous opportunities for encouraging students to read, for increasing vocabulary, and for teaching reading comprehension.

It is difficult to suggest a minimum level below which the students cannot handle the reading associated with contemporary problems. On the basis of experiences with such studies, I suggest that most students whose reading ability falls somewhere between the middle and top elementary grades will be able to read most newspaper and magazine articles. It is interesting to note that an analysis of several selections from the *British Columbia Hansard* (the provincial form of the *Congressional Record*) revealed reading levels that varied from grades seven through nine.[5]

The study of contemporary problems also provides opportunities to employ strategies designed to modify student attitudes. Attempting to change attitudes through classroom instruction is, at best, a very difficult matter. While a number of articles and books have focused

[5]The reading levels of these passages would have been rated even lower had the members given more attention to the length of their sentences as they spoke.

on the many variables that may affect one's sense of worthiness or degree of closed-mindedness, surprisingly few authors have reported research completed in these fields. A thorough review of the literature relating to self-concept is not appropriate here; however, several comments that are germane to a discussion of controversial problems with slow learners bear mention.

Several authors have suggested that presenting a challenge to students' academic abilities is an effective strategy for affecting self-concept. Coopersmith and Silverman (1969) argued that the student must be "challenged" in order to help him gain self-confidence, a position also taken by Purkey (1970, p. 50). Investigating community problems, with particular attention to the development of reading and critical thinking skills, will present such a challenge to most classes of slow-learning students. An awareness that these skills are increasing, coupled with an understanding of the amount and difficulty of the work being accomplished, might also positively affect student attitudes toward themselves.

Other factors associated with contemporary problems that might affect self-concept relate to the nature of such investigations. By studying community problems, the slow learner is removed from the simple studies too frequently offered him in the secondary program; instead, the student enters the "real" world and deals with matters commonly the domain of adults. It is not unreasonable to anticipate that when interest is generated by an investigation of a particular problem, students may find occasion to discuss the study with their parents and other adults. Should such discussion take place, it may serve to reinforce positive attitudes toward the study with a possible "spin-off" effect on student self-concept. Moreover, the interaction between students and adults that often occurs during the collection of data, in which students are usually not treated by the resource persons as slow learners, may also positively affect self-concept.

There is some evidence that supports the contention that degree of closed-mindedness can be affected by classroom instruction (Ehrlich, 1961; Frumkin, 1961; Pannes, 1963). Presently there appears to be a negative correlation between amount of schooling and degree of dogmatism. Kemp (1963), Weir (1963), and Mouw (1969) concluded that open-mindedness was encouraged in classrooms where students were allowed to express their opinions freely and where a variety of views was tolerated. The study of contemporary problems necessitates the examination of divergent positions and should be conducted in a classroom atmosphere in which students feel free to express and argue their views. If this atmosphere can be maintained in classes of slow-learning students, it is reasonable to assume that degree of student dogmatism will be affected.

Slow-Learning Students Examine a Contemporary Problem

Recently, the preceding strategies were employed with classes of slow-learning and non-academic students in a number of British Columbian secondary schools (Curtis, 1977). These schools were located in a variety of environments ranging from the large metropolitan Vancouver region to small rural communities. In each class, students utilized an inquiry approach to investigate housing conditions in their community. During the period of the project, interest in, and knowledge of, community problems increased (noted earlier); self-concept, critical thinking, and reading comprehension skills improved; while the degree of closed-mindedness among the students decreased.[6]

The investigations, lasting in several classes for almost half a term, were initiated with an exercise requiring teams of students to go into the community and, with the assistance of local realtors and newspaper advertisements, locate and describe housing facilities available for particular income groups. As the investigations progressed, hypotheses were formulated and examined by the students. These hypotheses were concerned with the adequacy of existing facilities, the factors affecting the costs and availability of housing, and the actions that might be taken—especially by the several levels of government—to encourage the construction of additional housing and to make existing accommodations more accessible for low- and middle-income families. Among the many topics that were studied during the investigations were: mortgages; lending rates; building regulations; building materials and methods; the role of unions; property, import, and excise taxes; housing problems of large families, families with children, and of people with divergent life styles; subsidized housing programs, alternatives (e.g., mobile homes, condominiums) to traditional housing, renting, and rental legislation.

Newspapers, magazines, political brochures, government publications (including selections from the debates of the provincial Legislative Assembly), along with other materials readily available in most communities, provided sources of data for the investigations. Critical thinking lessons[7]—based upon the skills described by Ennis (1964)—were developed from tapes of radio "hot-line" programs and the publications of various citizen and special interest groups.

Both field studies and interviews with resource persons played an

[6]The assessment program consisted of the pre- and post-test administrations of The Newspaper Headlines Test (see Oliver & Shaver, 1974, pp. 282–284), the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, the Cornell Critical Thinking Test, the Dogmatism Scale, the Reading Comprehension Subtest of the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, and the Freedoms Scale (developed by the author for the study).

[7]Copies of student worksheets for several lessons are available from the author upon request.

important role in the housing investigations. Not only were they additional sources of relevant information, but they served to make the studies more concrete by furnishing the students with direct, personal contacts with persons involved in specific aspects of the housing problem in their community. Furthermore, these activities often permitted individuals and groups of students to be working on their own away from the direct supervision of the teacher, providing them with numerous opportunities to practice responsible behavior.

While lack of suitable housing accommodations was determined to be a major social problem in each of the communities studied, because of differing conditions among the communities, the treatment of the various aspects of the problem varied with each class. As a consequence, although some field studies and interviews were common to most investigations, all of them depended to a great extent upon the particular community in which they were conducted. Some of the field studies—in several instances actually planned by the students—included surveys of apartment dwellers' opinions of recent rental legislation, visits to factories and building sites, and tours of housing projects for low-income groups and nursing homes for the aged. Some of the interviews conducted by the students were with bank and mortgage company managers, realtors, builders, developers, manufacturers of building materials, local and provincial politicians, trade unionists, city managers, operators of mobile home parks, managers of apartment blocks, and workers in social welfare agencies.

Surveys of student and parental attitudes toward the housing study and toward including the examination of contemporary community problems in the social studies curricula were conducted after completion of the studies. As noted earlier, students' responses favored including these studies in the social studies program. Generally, the students' arguments centered around the need to be informed in a democratic society. Responses from parents contained a similar theme. Additionally, some parents expressed approval for the housing study by describing their involvement with it. The following statements were selected from the comments of several parents:

> The study this year was of interest to the students and parents as well. Questions asked at home were in-depth, and a lot of research was done at home as well as in the school.

> My daughter found the study interesting and relevant. We discussed it at length within the family, and all gained a little by it.

> My son discussed many aspects of the program with us. I think it made him much more aware of his own future requirements and concerned over what the housing problem will do to him and others in his age group.

This study was not intended to provide answers to all the questions previously posed in the chapter. It did, however, support my previous experience that with adequate teacher and pupil planning—and the support of people in the community—slow-learning students can investigate community problems. Furthermore, the study provided support for a number of teaching strategies with potential for impacting closed-mindedness, critical thinking, self-concept, and reading.

Concluding Comments

In this chapter, several assumptions that seemed to be implicit in the lists of characteristics indicative of good citizenship for graduates of slow-learner programs were examined. Criteria that might be employed to select content and learning experiences for slow-learner social studies classes were also discussed. The study of controversial community problems was suggested as one approach to citizenship education that might be suitable in social studies courses for these students in the secondary grades. Additionally, a recent study involving slow-learning and non-academic students in the investigation of a contemporary problem was described briefly.

Much remains unsaid. The investigation of contemporary problems is not recommended as the total social studies program in the secondary school. Instead, it seems more appropriate to integrate these studies within the regular program and initiate the investigations either as student interest suggests or as the teacher deems necessary. Moreover, citizenship education cannot be considered the sole domain of the social studies program. If we broaden our concept of good citizenship, it is probable that a program will be developed that requires all the teachers of a special education program in a particular school to plan their instruction cooperatively.

The discussion of values has been postponed for another time. This is not meant to imply that such discussion is irrelevant to a consideration of citizenship education or the study of community problems by slow-learning pupils. In fact, as the investigation of a problem focuses on the consideration of what should be done about it, it becomes obvious that the values held by the students assume a significant role in the discussion. Although more work with slow-learning students is needed in this area, I suggest that during these discussions the students be made aware of the values implicit in their statements and of any inconsistencies or value conflicts implied by their arguments.

Public education in a democratic nation is committed to preparing all students with the skills necessary for accepting the responsibilities of citizenship. Slow learners, however, probably require a greater amount of assistance than other students. Earlier, reference was made to comments over "hot-line" broadcasts by persons whose diction and grammatical usage betrayed a general lack of education. It was no-

ticed that when these people managed to inform themselves about a particular problem, their opinions seemed no less valid than those of persons who appeared to be better educated. There is, unfortunately, another side to this coin. The same "hot-lines" have also carried comments by similar persons whose ignorance has resulted in vulnerability. Too often they seem to be victims of situations they do not comprehend, and they appear not even to know where they can go to find assistance. The wide variety of experiences involved in the examination of contemporary problems may reduce the degree of vulnerability and increase a sense of where to go to seek help.

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