DISCUSSION: MORNING SESSION, JUNE 4th

CURRICULUM THEORIES AND PRACTICES

Report by Richard Goodings (Durham)

The discussion centred on three main issues. The first was problems of methodology raised by Professor Robinsohn's paper. Speakers pointed out that, though there are general principles upon which curriculum reform should be based, and tendencies in such reforms which are common to many countries, yet the precise details of any programme must be peculiar to each country. The existing curriculum in any country is, in some measure, a product of the history, economic conditions and social structure of that country. Since these are never identical for any two countries, so must the starting points for reform differ, though perhaps only slightly. Therefore the reforms themselves differ in detail and any conceptual framework must allow for this. Comparative analysis could help by revealing common problems and illuminating strategies for reform.

Following from this it was suggested that Dr. Robinsohn's "situations", "qualifications" and "curriculum elements" were not each autonomous and independent, but were, in important ways, conditions of each other. If, for example, one wished to educate pupils for social responsibility, it was necessary to identify the situations in which they would be called upon to act responsibly in later life, and then define in the school situation the qualifications and curriculum elements that are needed. Further, a concept such as social responsibility was difficult or impossible to test operationally. In reply, Professor Robinsohn admitted the difficulty but pointed out that it was mitigated by some research evidence of the effects of various curricular offerings in producing even such complex skills as social responsibility.

The second main issue which was raised and which bore upon the papers of both speakers, was that of teacher training. One of the major difficulties in implementing any curriculum reform was persuading the teachers to make it effective. In the organisation of initial courses it is not possible to anticipate all the changes which will take place in a teacher's working life and the usefulness of in-service courses is limited. The problem is the general one of training teachers for change itself. This is very difficult in the best of circumstances and those taking education courses are not always the most able and most mature section of the student body. Curriculum reform is therefore inextricably bound up with the reform of teacher training, especially by up-grading the institutions and by less emphasis on method and more on conceptual background. Professor Markushevich pointed out that this difficulty had been appreciated in the Soviet Union where courses are provided to explain new curricula, to show how they can be implemented in the classroom and to give the teachers the necessary factual knowledge. All teachers
must pass such courses in their leisure time, and the new syllabuses are only
introduced into the schools when every teacher has so qualified. Other
speakers, however, urged that such courses should not merely introduce the
teacher to curricular changes which had been made but should make him a
partner in promoting and designing changes. The theory and practice of
curriculum development should be a subject of all teacher training pro-
grames. In many countries the current courses did not give the teacher that
understanding of the educational relevance of his subject which was an
essential prerequisite for his participation in its future development.

The third issue discussed related to Professor Markushevich's claim that
the Soviet Union, by a careful scrutiny and reform of both syllabuses and
teaching methods, had found it possible to reduce the primary course by one
year without affecting the ultimate level of attainment of the pupils. In
support of his contention that both Soviet and American research confirmed
that pupils in the Soviet Union had covered as much subject matter in ten
years as those in the United States in twelve, Professor Markushevich recalled
his own visit to the United States some ten years previously. He had then
had an opportunity to question pupils in the final year of high school. In
mathematics they were at a lower level than their contemporaries in the
Soviet Union. The American school in action had reminded him of a slow
motion film. The pupils were clearly intelligent and if the process were
 speeded up he thought they could match the performance of the Soviet
students.

To this, two related objections were raised. The first was that, though in
subjects such as mathematics, more intensive teaching might produce more
rapid progress, the general culture of the pupils which is both less easy to
measure and more difficult to cram, might well be lower. Professor Mark-
ushevich replied that, when in the United States he had also questioned
students of the humanities. Asked to name a Soviet writer and a French
writer they could not do so. He had later mentioned this to the U.S.
Commissioner for Education who had agreed with his observations. He thought
American pupils were too narrowly confined to Anglo-Saxon culture and
knew too little of any other.

The second objection was that, though the pupils might learn as much
subject matter in ten years as in twelve, living in the school community was
itself an important part of education. Though it would be difficult to quantify,
it seemed likely that the longer period in school would affect the personalities
of the pupils in beneficial ways. One cannot therefore conclude that because
we have taught the pupil the same amount of subject content in ten years,
we have done the same thing for him as we would if we had kept him in
school for twelve. Professor Markushevich replied that school is, after all, a
rather artificial situation. The school can do certain tasks but he did not think
it could directly pursue the development of the personality. He believed that
there was an optimal dose of education and in the Soviet Union they had
decided that this was ten years. But it would require complicated research to prove that this was right and that ten years was the right period of preparation for life. At the moment each country must decide for itself.

DISCUSSION : MERCREDI 4 JUIN 1969

ASPECTS THEORIQUES ET PRATIQUES DU PROGRAMME D’ETUDES

Par Richard Goodings, Durham

A propos des questions de méthodologie soulevées par l’exposé du Professeur Robinsohn, plusieurs personnes ont dit que bien qu’il y ait des principes généraux et des lignes d’action communes sur lesquels doivent se fonder les réformes des programmes d’études, dans chaque pays, des considérations d’ordre historique, économique et social influencent le point de départ des réformes et les aspects de ces réformes. Ceci doit être pris en considération lors de la définition de n’importe quel cadre général. Le Professeur Robinsohn a admis qu’il n’était pas facile de déterminer pour chaque pays les éléments des programmes d’études qui permettront aux élèves de faire face aux problèmes de leur vie future.

On discuta ensuite du rôle de l’enseignant dans la mise en exécution des programmes d’études. Professeur Markushevich fit remarquer qu’en URSS il y a des cours qui permettent à l’enseignant d’étudier, pendant ses heures de loisir, les différents aspects d’un nouveau programme qui n’est appliqué dans l’école que lorsque tous les enseignants le connaissent parfaitement. D’autres personnes insistèrent sur le fait que l’enseignant devrait jouer un rôle plus actif et être associé aux propositions de changement. La formation des enseignants devrait permettre une meilleure compréhension de la théorie et de la pratique de l’élaboration des programmes d’études.

Le dernier sujet de discussion porta sur l’affirmation du Professeur Markushevich, selon laquelle l’Union Soviétique était parvenue, en couvrant en 10 ans toutes les matières qui sont enseignées aux États-Unis sur une période de 12 ans, à réduire d’un an la durée des études primaires. Cette affirmation donna lieu à deux objections, la première étant que, s’il est possible d’accélérer l’étude des mathématiques, par contre, un enseignement plus intensif pourrait fort bien affecter la culture générale ; ce à quoi le Professeur Markushevich répondit que la culture générale des élèves américains était très limitée. À la seconde objection, selon laquelle le fait de réduire la durée de la scolarité en vue d’études plus intensives pourrait nuire à la personnalité de l’élève, il répondit que la formation de la personnalité n’était pas nécessairement l’un des objectifs de l’enseignement à l’école et il ajouta que la durée maximale de la scolarité restait encore à déterminer.