THE SYSTEM OF NEW CURRICULA IN THE GENERAL SCHOOLS OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

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In February 1965 the People’s Chamber of the German Democratic Republic passed the Act on the Integrated Socialist Education System which was worked out on the basis of the Programme of Socialism decided upon at the Sixth Party Congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and widely discussed by the population.

Since this Law was passed over four years ago far-reaching changes have taken place in the practice of education. This Act ensures the continuous development of our school system over a long period. It incorporates not only our own extensive experience in educational policy and pedagogics but also that of the other socialist countries, especially of the Soviet Union, and at the same time takes into account future predictable developments in socialist society in the 1970’s and 1980’s.

On the basis of the Act and of resolutions passed by the Ministry of Education of the G.D.R. a new system of curricula has been worked out in the past years which determines the aim, content and main trends in the process of ten-year secondary education for all children.

The new system of curricula was worked out in broadly based socialist team work under the guidance of the Central German Institute of Education, which is the central research institute of the GDR Ministry of Education. No less than 3,000 educational experts and teachers from schools took part in this work. In the decisions upon the content of education the Institute was guided by social requirements as a whole and by the fact that the integrated socialist education system is a part of the over-all system of socialist society and is thus linked with every other part of the socialist system.

It is therefore obvious that the system of curricula must guarantee a broad general education which will provide the foundations for all further education. Prognoses of future social requirements call for a steady improvement in the standard of education and balanced proportions between the various fields. The curricula have been worked out with this in mind.

To accord with the new social and scientific demands, traditional school syllabuses and courses were brought up to the level of modern standards of scientific knowledge, out-moded subject matter was removed and new fields added. It was clear that a higher level of education could be attained not primarily through an expansion of subject-matter but through greater precision and a more exact determination of what was to form the subject of instruction within the educational process.

If we take the natural sciences as an example here — since it was a question of proceeding even more consistently along the lines already indicated in the older curricula — the main points of the revised curricula are:
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(a) greater concentration on systematic penetration into the basic terms and theories in the separate sciences;
(b) the elaboration of guidelines linking one science to another and development of an integrated system in natural science education;
(c) orientation on modern experimental methods of teaching the natural sciences, on providing a unified methodological system and a knowledge of the most important modes of thinking and working in the natural sciences;
(d) a purposive linking up of theoretical knowledge and its application in practice;
(e) purposeful ideological-educational penetration of the entire teaching of natural science subjects.

In the teaching of chemistry, for example, this has resulted in considerable changes in the structure of the syllabi, taking modern points of view into account while retaining the essential subject-matter usually taught in school. It was possible in this way to remove descriptive matter on separate elements or chemical compounds and give more scope to a profounder study of the laws and their application.

The new curricula have already been introduced in successive years up to the 7th school year and the curricula for the 8th, 9th and 10th school year and for the 11th and 12th school year of the extended secondary school have already been completed and will be introduced up to the school year 1971/72.

The teaching programme has the character of a system, i.e. there are fundamental relations within the system between aim, content and method. The specific quality of a system is no longer only the sum of the qualities of its separate elements, but also the result of the way in which they are connected and coupled.

The fundamental system-like relations which had to be borne in mind in planning the educational process in the new curricula are the links between aim, content and method. We cannot deal with these relations here in a more detailed way, but we would like to refer to the fact that they are based on the fundamental model Marxist-Leninist concept of the development of man and the purposeful educational influence on development. We know — Karl Marx stated this with classical simplicity in his famous third thesis on Feuerbach — that the nature and evolution of man is determined in the course of active interactions with his objective environment, not primarily — and certainly not only — in inner development or biological maturation. In active interactions with his social environment man takes on the generic characteristics of mankind present in this environment and thus develops the specific human qualities of personality which can only be rationally understood as an "ensemble of social relations". Here the social environment, and appropriation of it, does not affect the personality in a direct line; it is "broken" by the inner activity of the personality; inner contradictions arising in this process form the immediate actual force in the evolution of man.
Educational influences on development have the characteristic — compared with manifold other influences — that they are directed by an aim, that the content to be appropriated is thus consciously selected and structured, creating a systematic and organisational structure of conditions for the process of appropriation.

The aim of education is the basic factor determining the system in planning and shaping the educational process. This aim arises out of the demands and laws underlying the development of socialist society. It was formulated as follows in § 1 of the Act on the Integrated Socialist Education System of February 1965:

"1. The aim of the integrated socialist education system is a high standard of education for the entire population, education for all-round and harmoniously developed socialist personalities who consciously shape social life, transform nature and lead a full and happy life worthy of human dignity".¹

There are therefore two important aspects in this aim: a high standard of education for all and an all-round education. With regard to a high standard of education for all, the socialist Constitution lays down that all children shall attend the ten-year secondary school, where they are to obtain a modern, socialist general education. Analyses of future development of the social system of socialism confirm that this basic education will have ever-increasing importance for special training in institutions of further education, for the necessary civic consciousness and activity, and for a full life in the socialist community of man.

In developing the new curricula we have thoroughly analysed the prognoses in various partial fields of the social system, including those in other sectors of education. This made it clear that it cannot be a matter, for example, of trying to prepare young people in detail for every imaginable demanding or decisive situation which may arise in the future. It is therefore a matter, in all educational work of secondary education, of providing the foundations for the comprehensively developed socialist personality. Accordingly, the content of education in the new curricula had to be conceived as a basic educational concept suitable for further elaboration and development.

A further aim of education is, as we have seen, determined by the term comprehensiveness: an all-round development which accords with the genuine humanism of Marxism-Leninism and its idea of the nature of man and of human culture. The content of the term comprehensive or all-round development of the socialist personality is changing, especially under the influence of rapid developments in science and its role as an immediate productive force, of the technological revolution and also in connection with the fundamentally changed position of man in socialist society and with the forming of

socialist culture. This brings with it the necessity of conceiving anew the content of socialist general education in the sense of the concrete-historical ideal of the all-round development of man.

We take the view that man becomes man only if he appropriates the human environment in all the proportions characteristic for a modern socialist society. All fields of knowledge taken together contribute to the individual's system of knowledge and experience, to developing his picture of the world. And this picture will be one-sided, if let us say, the proportions between the natural and social sciences are shifted to one side or the other, or if the introduction into the foundations of modern technology and production in polytechnical instruction is not regarded as an essential part of general education, or if social activity, the specific skills connected with an aesthetic appropriation of reality and the elementary productive-artistic activities are neglected.

It is one of the educational aims in general education not only to provide unitary foundations of all-round education for all members of society but also to develop the special skills and talents of each individual, to educate every member of society to become a creative personality who will be extremely active and do creative and productive work in his profession and in social life as a whole. The Act on the Integrated Socialist Education System therefore states that unity of aim and structure of the socialist education system includes differentiations in the educational roads to be followed and consideration for individual learning capacity in lessons, through out-of-school educational activities and other measures.²

Accordingly, the forming of foundations in the higher school years (we shall deal with this later) is supplemented and consolidated by imparting special differentiated contents mainly by organising a system of extra-curricular activities and optional lessons.

The aim of education is, finally, an individual who unites in his personality comprehensive knowledge and skills with a high quality of socialist consciousness and behaviour. When we take the content, the subject-matter, as it has been determined in the different curricula, and look at it in relation to the complex aim of forming the socialist personality, then it is clear that the term ‘subject-matter’ had to receive a new definition which is broader in scope.

The term subject-matter now no longer, as hitherto, covers only the knowledge and understanding which pupils are expected to gain, but also specific methods and techniques of learning and working which are often set down in the curricula, especially in the natural science subjects, in the form of activities and operations to be undertaken by pupils. Ideological concepts and conclusions, which follow organically from the knowledge and understanding to be acquired, are also part of the term ‘subject-matter’.

Up to now we have been illustrating fundamental inter-relations of the system within the relations of aims and content. With aims in mind we have pointed out necessary consequences for the selection and structure of the content of general education.

An analysis of the developing tendencies of science, i.e. the “explosion of knowledge” in our times, viewed from the point of view of the general school with its task of imparting a basic education for all children, coincides with the conclusions demanded by the aim. But, all the same, the selection of the necessary subject-matter in detail was a very difficult problem. Together with experts in the Academy of Sciences in Berlin and many other outstanding specialists, our Institute undertook thorough research into and prognostic analyses of trends in development in each separate field of science and life.

These analyses showed clearly that scientific development in all fields is characterised by an ever stronger tendency to proceed from facts and single items of knowledge to recognition of underlying laws and the elaboration of theoretical systems. Accordingly in physics and in other natural science subjects, the theoretical guiding lines “matter” and “energy” have become lines determining the system of re-arrangement and of the new structure of the subject-matter. The orientation on the elaboration of supra-subject theoretical links goes so far as to stress thinking in terms of structures, systems, and variants. In the general school it is therefore already necessary to make pupils aware of the system character of phenomena and processes of development in nature and society and to introduce the children in an elementary way to thinking in systems.

Such guiding lines of knowledge, for example, in working out the links between structure and function in biology lessons, or the maintenance and transformation of energy, run through not only the single subjects from year to year, but also take on importance in linking different subjects in the arrangement and structure of subject-matter within the various groups of subjects, for instance the natural science and polytechnical subjects. Along these lines they are becoming more and more relevant to ideology; they culminate in knowledge which has immediate ideological, political and moral importance.

A second line of development emerging from a prognostic analysis of the sciences is connected with the outstanding importance of systems of method in science today. One can even say that the leaps forward in scientific development in separate disciplines, e.g., in the development of biology since the beginning of the 1960’s, are connected with the introduction of new systems of method in biology, especially methods of physical, chemical and mathematical research. Methods of thought and work therefore take on outstanding importance in up-to-date teaching and thus in re-determining the content of general education. Here special emphasis falls on methods of rational intake, processing, storing, and transmitting of information. Most important here is the work with books, catalogues, indexes and charts, purposeful observation
and experimenting, note-taking, outlining, collecting of material, preparation of written and oral reports, talks and short lectures and the like. It is in fact a question of introducing pupils to algorithmic rules for processes, e.g., experiments, and enabling them to solve practical and scientific problems in an elementary form. Here the ability to approach the solution of problems, for example in experimental science lessons, in fulfilling production tasks in polytechnical instruction, or in work in the social field, should be trained and the working out of variants and alternatives in preparing for decision making, important for the development of prognostic thinking, should be practised. In this way pupils can be taught to take a conscious attitude in situations calling for decisions and they can be prepared for this by means of suitable exercises, which again have comprehensive significance for training behaviour.

Thirdly, the relevance of modern scientific-technological development to ideology can, after all, not be ignored. The entire development of science in our day tends strongly in the direction of a unified scientific view of the world, such as — in our opinion — dialectical and historical materialism provides, and calls for a political and moral decision in favour of socialism from the citizens of our state. The development of knowledge and systems of knowledge in the class-room must therefore be carried out in such a way that all single items of scientific knowledge are integrated into a system of fundamental ideological-philosophical, political and moral convictions, appropriately evaluated and related to attitude and motivation. This ideological integration of the scientific world outlook must be linked with education of fundamental traits of character, education leading to endurance and persistence and exactness in learning and in work, to elasticity in the attitude to decisions, to a desire to continue learning and to a desire for creative achievements for socialist society.

At this point I wish to make some remarks on “indoctrination” which were originally not contained in my manuscript, but this problem was raised here yesterday by Professor Robinson.

For example, we lead our children to realize the fact that history proceeds according to laws and that it is therefore possible and necessary to draw inevitable lessons from it. Taking our own history, for instance, the children learn that German militarism and imperialism — especially in two world wars — has brought immeasurable sorrow and destruction to our nation and to other nations. The children come to the inevitable and imperative realization that this must never happen again and that the Germans, because of their history and their geographical position in Europe, have a great responsibility in deciding whether there will be war or peace in Europe. They are led to the understanding, for example, that a peaceful future excludes the demand for a revision of existing frontiers (which are a result of imperialist Germany’s aggression) and necessitates peaceful co-existence in the framework of a European security system.