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FOR LOW ACHIEVERS.

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SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL SOCIAL STUDIES
PROGRAMS FOR LOW ACHIEVERS

by

James K. Uphoff

A Dissertation

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The University of Nebraska in the Teachers College
in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
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APPROVED BY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For many years, the problem of low achievers has been the object of much concern on the part of both parents and educators. Moreover, the magnitude of the problem has not been diminished over the years. Because of the increasing complexity and interdependency of American society, today, more than ever before, immediate attention must be focused on these youngsters in order that meaningful programs of instruction can be developed for them. This seems to be especially necessary in the social studies field because it is charged with producing informed and responsible citizens. Since citizenship is so important, the social studies must be concerned with all pupils, not with just some of them. One author is highly critical of the public school system in this nation. She is concerned about the twenty-four percent of the youth who do not finish high school and the seventy percent who are not bound for college. She states,

Our out-of-date, undemocratic and unworkable public school system largely neglects or mistreats educationally the 70 percent of young people not college bound and not wishing to be, and is therefore mainly responsible for creating thousands of dropouts, delinquents, unemployables and welfare recipients.¹

¹Alice Widener, "How Ohio Meets Education's Reality," Sunday Omaha (Nebraska) World-Herald, January 29, 1967, pp. 8-F.

Howard H. Cummings, a specialist for social science and geography for the United States Office of Education, calls attention to the plight of the low achiever when he declares that many children "probably cannot read the material assigned by social studies teachers. One-fifth of the students of high school age is a large enough group to demand special consideration from the teachers and administrators charged with the task of building a school curriculum."²

Haggerson and Weber examined the instructional programs of eighty high schools and concluded that there were four general ways of providing for individual differences. Ability grouping was the most predominant type and the only category which was even partially aimed at assisting the low achiever.³

According to DeHaan and Doll, grouping found early advocates in the 1920's and has continued to be a key item in a number of plans. Many of these "have emphasized so-called homogeneous grouping, though this form of grouping has not been found consistently effective."⁴ The authors

²Howard H. Cummings, "The Social Studies in the Secondary School Today," Social Studies in the Senior High School, Willis D. Moreland, editor. (Washington, D. C.: National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Series, No. Seven, 1965) p. 3.

³Nelson Haggerson and Del Weber, "Approaches to the Instructional Program in Senior High School Social Studies," Social Studies in the Senior High School, op. cit., pp. 95-103.

⁴Robert F. DeHaan and Ronald C. Doll, "Individualization and Human Potential," Individualizing Instruction, Ronald C. Doll, editor. (Washington, D. C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1964 Yearbook) pp. 10-11.

conclude that:

Most of the proposals carry the implication that standard content should be learned more speedily. Educators have learned, however, that rate of learning prescribed content is only one consideration in individualization. Learning is personal, unique, unstandardized, furthermore, learning has numerous dimensions, and it is without limit. Obviously then, new and different proposals are needed...⁵

The National Council for the Social Studies Curriculum Bulletin Number Seven describes in some detail programs in existence in selected senior high schools throughout the country. These six schools were chosen in part "because they illustrated some promising approaches to the organization of the social studies program in the senior high school."⁶ The program of Cincinnati, Ohio is one of the few which appears to devote any direct or comprehensive attention to the needs of the low achiever.

Of the five-hundred sixty-eight dissertations reported in the National Council for the Social Studies Research Bulletin Number Two, only a handful give any attention to the low achiever and none focus direct attention to the total senior high school program for these pupils.⁷

⁵Ibid., p. 11.

⁶"Selected Programs of Instruction, Grades Ten, Eleven and Twelve," Social Studies in the Senior High School, op. cit., p. 41.

⁷Walter E. McPhie, Dissertations in Social Studies Education: A Comprehensive Guide, (Washington, D.C.: National Council for the Social Studies, Research Bulletin No. Two, 1964) pp. 1-89.

Attention must, then, be given to this acute problem since the low achievers will be voters and adult citizens in just a few years. It is apparent that many of the skills and abilities needed by this group of young people can only be provided in the social studies program. It is, therefore, essential to develop meaningful social studies programs if the school is to fulfill its obligation to produce effective citizens.

The problems of the dropout are well-known and the low achiever in social studies often becomes a dropout of one kind or another. West and Doll summarize the problem and necessity for attention to this area when they state:

A population which is burgeoning in an era of rapid scientific and technological development and in times of ever-present threat to the national welfare can ill afford the waste of talent which results from pupils' dropping out of school psychologically even before they leave physically.⁸

The investigator believed that this research would determine some of the data necessary for effective action on the problem of low achievers in senior high school social studies. He felt that an assessment guide which could be used as a model by schools in establishing or altering their own instructional programs might be developed. The selected principals and teachers would benefit through self-assessment

⁸Jeff West and Ronald C. Doll, "The Need and the Setting," Individualizing Instruction, op. cit., p. 4.

of their own programs and this might lead to benefits for their pupils as well.

Statement of the Problem:

The purpose of this study was to ascertain the nature of the social studies programs for low achievers in randomly selected senior high schools throughout the United States. An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the various programs as viewed by the principals and teachers involved was to be determined by this investigation.

Definitions:

Low achievers: Those pupils who for ability and/or motivational reasons fail to achieve at an average or above average level in senior high school social studies. Specifically excluded were those students classified as mentally retarded or special education pupils.

Programs: All administrative, organizational, and/or instructional provisions made for the low achiever. This included such things as curriculum, methods, materials, etc.

Senior high schools: Grades ten through twelve only, even though a particular school might have additional grades within it.

Procedures:

1. Professional literature on the topic was reviewed by the investigator in order to identify the pupils as to

their characteristics, main problems, and possible solutions.

2. A two part questionnaire was developed based upon data obtained through a review of the literature, tested on a pilot basis, and then revised before final printing.

3. The first questionnaire was sent to one hundred senior high school principals in randomly selected cities of the 25,000--100,000 population class. It requested them to indicate and assess the curricular, organizational, and administrative aspects of their programs for low achievers in social studies. They were also asked to name teachers whom they felt carried out their school's philosophy and program for low achievers. Eighty-four returns were received.

4. All one hundred ~~four~~ teachers named by the responding schools that indicated the use of curriculum and/or tracking provisions for low achievers received the second part of the questionnaire. They were asked to indicate and assess the instructional materials and provisions utilized by them and their school. ~~Eighty-seven~~ responded.

5. Follow-up procedures which consisted of first a reminder letter and then, if necessary, a second complete set of materials, were used to assure an adequate return. Personal, handwritten comments on each letter were also used by the investigator.

6. Selected schools which had participated in the study were visited by the investigator in order to confirm and supplement the data obtained via the questionnaires.

Conferences were held with administrators and teachers, classes for low achievers were observed, and the results reported. In addition, two school systems not included in the survey were also visited. Each was known for an aspect of its social studies program for senior high school low achievers⁹ and these aspects had been recommended by some of the respondents to the printed questionnaire.

7. The results were tabulated, analyzed, and put into a reportable form. These results were then sent to each respondent who requested such action on the survey form.

Plan of the Study:

Chapter II reviews the literature on the topic. The low achiever was examined as to his characteristics, the problems he faces in senior high school social studies, and what solutions have been suggested for those problems.

The third chapter reports the reports the results of the Administrative Questionnaire. Tables are used to help in the presentation of the data. Teacher assignment, curriculum, grouping, and evaluation are topics specifically covered.

In chapter IV the teaching practices of the respondents are reported. Background, assignment, procedures, and evaluation are all discussed.

⁹Planning for School Improvement, (Bellevue, Nebraska: Bellevue Public Schools, January 30, 1967) pp. 41, 68.

The fifth chapter presents the data obtained via the personal visits of the investigator to six schools. Topics covered are essentially the same as those in the two preceding chapters.

The final chapter, number six, presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of the investigator. It attempts to indicate the overall results of this study.

PREVIEW

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

PUPILS:

Who is the low achiever? What is he or she like? Where are they found? All of these questions are highly pertinent and must be answered in detail. In order to understand this study it is necessary to know and to understand the pupils whose problems have made this research necessary.

As previously defined, the low achiever is the student whose past record indicates failure or near-failure in social studies courses. However it is possible to divide this group into three fairly distinct sub-groups, each with special problems and characteristics. The three sub-groups will be examined separately and in detail.

Slow Learners. This category of students is probably the most easily defined and identifiable. The Dictionary of Education gives for the slow learner the following definition.

learner, slow: (1) a child who comes within the group between the average and mentally deficient levels of intelligence and who is sufficiently inferior to the average group to warrant special educational provisions; (2) in terms of intelligence quotient (IQ), a pupil who falls within the range from 75-89...¹

¹Carter V. Good, (ed.), Dictionary of Education, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1959) p. 313.

The same publication also defines a slow-learning child as one "...though capable of achieving a moderate degree of academic success, will do so at a slower rate and with less average efficiency; can usually be adequately cared for in the regular classroom if limitations are recognized and accepted."²

While not the first to call attention to the problem, Richard McFeely and others indicated their concern about these youngsters several decades ago. The National Council for the Social Studies 1944 Yearbook was devoted to individual differences. Under the heading, "Nature of the Slow Learner," McFeely states,

Observation of the 'slow learners' who attend the school has led to the inference that they have no characteristics or qualities not found in the so-called normal or above-normal pupil. Rather their particular qualities seem to be due to a different proportion or emphasis in their total make-up, and perhaps a difference in their mental organization. For example, the slow learner reads, but proceeds rather slowly and laboriously if the material is at all abstract. He also experiences difficulty in coordinating two or more mental functions, such as reading and evaluating what he reads. He assimilates new ideas and facts slowly. He learns most easily from simple, concrete, practical material and activities. He is rather literal-minded, given to making observations without generalizing. He often has developed a deep feeling of insecurity and inadequacy in academic work which is often accompanied by a dislike of such work.³

²Ibid., p. 89.

³Richard H. McFeely, "Faculty Planning to Meet Individual Differences: For the Slow Learners," Adapting Instruction in the Social Studies to Individual Differences, Krug and Anderson, editors. Fifteenth Yearbook of the National Council for the Social Studies, (Washington, D.C., 1944), p. 64.

Bernard has noted that "the slow learner needs about three times as many experiences to consolidate learning as does the normal and bright pupil."⁴ This would present additional problems for teachers and may explain why teachers view "the unsuccessful pupils as relatively undependable, troublesome, and disadvantaged."⁵

Abramowitz has devoted much time and study to the problems of slow learners in the social studies. He identifies and describes these pupils as follows:

Teachers of slow learners soon understand that a major shortcoming of this type of pupil is a marked inability to absorb subject matter and to use such subject matter in the development of intelligent generalizations. Nor is this surprising since most slow learners are defeated by the existing techniques of subject matter presentation, and this, in turn, makes generalizations meaningless since they must rest upon some basis of substantive knowledge. Since the slow learner has few facts at his command he is unable to perceive the thread that ties them together or links them to other associated facts. This can be explained, in part, by the inability of such students to learn and retain factual matter contained in existing texts which were designed for an entirely different sort of student. This inability frustrates teachers as well as students.⁶

⁴Harold W. Bernard, Psychology of Learning and Teaching, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1965) p. 230.

⁵"Research Clues," NEA Journal, 55:41, April, 1966.

⁶Jack Abramowitz, "How Much Subject Matter Content for the Slow Learner?" Social Education, 27:11, January, 1963.

Underachievers. It appears that the underachiever has had much more attention devoted to his existence and problems than has the slow learner. Perhaps this is because these youngsters are generally considered to be bright but are sluffers whereas the slow learner is simply considered a sluffer and offers no hope or potential.

The Dictionary of Education defines underachievement as, "Academic achievement at a level below the one expected on the basis of the student's performance on general aptitude tests."⁷ Wellington and Wellington studied these pupils and used similar criteria of selection. They report that "it is certain that the number of underachievers in the schools today is great enough to qualify as a major problem. Many superintendents say it is their greatest single problem."⁸

One of the most perplexing aspects of this problem of underachievement is that few conclusions can be made on the basis of the many research studies which have been conducted. Peterson examined most of the available data, found numerous contradictions, and concluded:

The term 'underachiever,' which is of relatively recent coinage, appears with predictable regularity in the contents of the journals. If students suddenly began to accomplish at a level precisely commensurate with ability, research would suffer a staggering blow.

⁷Dictionary of Education, op. cit., p. 585.

⁸C. Burleigh Wellington and Jean Wellington, The Underachiever: Challenges and Guidelines, (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965) p. 6.

The published results pour forth--segmented, molecular, seeking the causal factor. But the anxious reader, hoping to assemble the findings into a coherent whole, encounters an overwhelming obstacle: the pieces don't fit together.⁹

The Wellingtons also examined all available data, including that of Peterson's, and with an awareness of the conflicting research results, attempted to draw together a composite picture based upon what most studies seemed to reveal. They report that many studies "have isolated certain characteristics...(and) the repetition of certain characteristics offers a tentative hypothesis that these are present in many underachievers."¹⁰

It is in this context, then, that the Wellingtons present what they consider to be a typical underachiever.

From our tabulations of 525 students we might construct a hypothetical underachiever. He is a boy about fifteen years old, generally attractive, well-dressed, not unpopular with either students or teachers. His IQ is 125, and he succeeds well on achievement tests. He lives in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, and his father went to college. He is in the college preparatory course, and he says that he plans to attend a university. He is the first born in his family and has one brother and one sister. Our underachiever is not a potential dropout; he attends school regularly and is not an active discipline problem. His marks are not failing but are too low for most colleges... (he) participates in only one out-of-class activity.

⁹John Peterson, "The Researcher and the Underachiever: Never the Twain Shall Meet," Phi Delta Kappan, 44:379, May, 1963.

¹⁰Wellington, op. cit., pp. 21-22.

His pattern of typical underachieving began in grade six, though careful study shows many earlier signs; and he has managed to "get by" with minimum effort since beginning junior high. He has two hobbies outside of school and often spends time on them. He plays the drums...and he likes most sports, though he does not excel in any.¹¹

Thus from study to study certain characteristics seem to predominate according to the Wellingtons and others. These include such additional items as the almost non-existent father-son relationship, two to three times as many boys as girls, low dominance, low concern for others, low self-confidence, low seriousness of purpose, low sense of responsibility, low motivation, and reliance on external pressure but with low capacity to function under pressure.¹²

Carl Salsbury, a high school principal in Milburn, New Jersey, discusses underachievers but seems to broaden the description somewhat. He states that they have

...limited reading ability, limited vocabulary so they have difficulty in communication, sometimes a value system which is in conflict with the value system of our community as a whole...Sometimes they have isolated themselves; they are self-isolated from the more fortunate members of the community. And they have limited opportunities of developing adequate self-esteem or self-image because of the nature of the society in which they find themselves. They have limited opportunities for coming in contact with model adults who understand them. These are not youngsters who go to church. They are not associated with the young peoples' groups in the

¹¹Ibid., pp. 56-57.

¹²Ibid., pp. 23-54.

churches; they are not associated with recreation departments.

...(There is) a high incidence of divorce and separation in the home...there is alcoholism; there is mental illness.¹³

Mr. Salsbury's description appears to be one commonly used for disadvantaged and deprived youngsters. Indicating that there might be some overlap between these two categories, the Wellingtons refer to potential dropouts and culturally deprived when they state that "the line between them and underachievers remains indistinct."¹⁴

As indicated early in this discussion, the use of test scores--ability, aptitude, achievement--is essential in the process of selecting and/or classifying underachievers. Since the entire underachiever identification process is based upon various standardized tests and the validity of these tests has been challenged, some writers question the validity of studies concerning the underachiever.

Gorman and Ritchie state, "It has been generally known among students of education and psychology for a generation that I.Q. tests measure acculturation rather than native ability or capacity for development."¹⁵

¹³Franklin P. Morley, "The Roles of Supervisors and Administrators," Individualizing Instruction, Ronald C. Doll, editor, (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1964 Yearbook) p. 148.

¹⁴Wellington, op. cit., p. 81.

¹⁵Burton W. Gorman and Oscar W. Ritchie, "How Tough Are the 'Tough' Schools?" Educational Leadership, 22:551, May, 1965.

The NEA Journal recently reported charges "that such tests discriminate against pupils coming from culturally deprived backgrounds and tend to underrate the intellectual potential of these children."¹⁶ If this is true, and 81.4 percent of the secondary teachers polled indicated they had some doubts about current uses of these tests,¹⁷ then many of these deprived children would not be classified as underachievers when in reality they might be underachieving to a degree much more serious than those non-deprived pupils who are currently identified as underachievers. One must be cognizant of this situation as he studies the results and findings of various investigations concerning underachievers.

Disadvantaged. "The Decade of the sixties might be characterized as the decade of the disadvantaged inasmuch as societal concerns for children and for the poor are converging in public education today."¹⁸ The United States Office of Education now has available some 1700 reports and other documents on the disadvantaged.¹⁹ These youngsters, some of whom may be slow learners and some of whom may be underachievers, do have some characteristics uniquely their own.

¹⁶"Teacher-Opinion Poll," NEA Journal, 55:31, April, 1966.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Bernard Spodek, "Poverty, Education, and the Young Child," Educational Leadership, 22:593, May, 1965.

¹⁹teps NEWSletter, 10:2, November 15, 1966.

If one can say that Salsbury pointed to the door in providing a partial description, then it can certainly be said that Ayer opens that door.

Poverty in all its easily seen aspects--inadequate diet, poor housing, wretched clothing, no spending money, limited experience in the realm of concepts and communication of abstract ideas, uniform upper and middle class goals beyond mental reach and any reasonable hope of practical achievement--is the great factor of discrimination in this nation. Lack of intellectual potential is not disproportionately the norm among the poor and the children of the poor.

Rather an environment favorable to the development of intellectual potential does not exist for the poor either in pre-school years or in early school experience or in the home and the community. Social acceptance is denied by the peer-age group... Poverty, therefore, is both the cause and the result of poverty--poverty of the mind, and of the spirit and of material goods.²⁰

DeHaan and Doll observe that these youngsters "are often alienated from the school environment, and are harrassed and pressured outside school."²¹ Crosby points out the mobility of disadvantaged youngsters and the resultant problems. An educational lag which widens and deepens as these disadvantaged children move through their school years is one of those problems according to Crosby. She also sees poor motivation and self concept as areas of concern. "His

²⁰P. F. Ayer, "Poverty and Reeducation," Educational Leadership, 22:541-2, May, 1965.

²¹Robert F. DeHaan and Ronald C. Doll, "Individualization and Human Potential," Individualizing Instruction, op. cit., p. 12.