

WHAT CAN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL DO TO PREPARE FOR WINNING THE PEACE?

EDWIN H. REEDER

University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois

The last forty years have constituted a period of very rapid change in public school education. This statement is true of all features of the school system, including school buildings, professional training of teachers, compulsory attendance age and the like. In no department of education has it been more true than in the field of the curriculum. From a curriculum composed largely of dead, inert, static factual material, the schools have moved toward subject matter which is alive, changing and within the realm of children's interests and comprehension. Dead wood has been cut away and rich and stimulating new material has been added.

This change has been particularly noteworthy in the field of the social studies. In this section of the school curriculum there has been an increasing tendency to introduce problems of contemporary life and of national and international thought. Leading educational theorists have been largely responsible for this movement for they have insisted in their speaking and writing that the schools should introduce contemporary problems into their curricula.

On the whole this tendency has been a thoroughly desirable and healthy one. There is one aspect of it, however, that has been unfortunate. Theorists have used the expression "the school" in an entirely indiscriminating manner, as though the children of our schools were homogeneous in their maturity and power to grasp ideas or to deal with data. The absurdity of this assumption is obvious as soon as it is stated, but it has apparently not been recognized by many leaders and teachers in the elementary school. Urged on by the unanalytic pleadings of educational theorists, these practitioners have often introduced into the curriculum of the elementary school problems of economic, social and political import, the solutions of which require a capacity to grasp abstruse ideas or to

manipulate complicated data which is far beyond the abilities of common school children. One often suspects that such ability may even be far beyond that of the average teacher!

At first thought, one might well conclude that the problem of winning the peace after this war is over is one of those complicated problems, the introduction of no element of which into the elementary school can be defended. It is, of course, obvious that such a topic as economic international relations after the war would be far too difficult for a child in the elementary school. But it is the belief of the writer that in a democracy there are three elements in the solution of most problems, and that with respect to the question of winning the peace, two of these elements can be presented to elementary school children.

The three elements are: first, the emotional background upon which a majority of our citizens must agree if they are to accept the solutions offered by their experts and representatives at the peace table; second, the mass of factual data which will constitute the basis for developing the peace terms; third, the actual solution of the world's peace problems as worked out in the final treaty.

As an illustration of these three elements consider the problem of how to satisfy the needs of all nations for the world's basic raw materials. This problem will have to be dealt with if a permanent peace is to be hoped for; indeed it was recognized as of first importance when Roosevelt and Churchill included it in the Atlantic Charter. In this document, "to further the enjoyment of all states, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms, to the trade and raw materials of the world" was stated as a war aim of the United Nations.

It seems obvious that if this provision of the Charter is to be fulfilled it will mean that nations will have to give up,

in some measure at least, their sovereign control of the raw materials within their boundaries. This will be a difficult thing for many Americans to accept; it will constitute a radical change in that emotional background in the light of which they have considered all relationships with foreign countries. The first element in the solution of the raw materials question is, therefore, the emotional framework within which the details of the peace treaty will be enclosed.

The second element is the factual one; where are raw materials found, how far have the different nations developed them, how far can they be developed, where are they located with respect to strategic transportation routes and present centers of industrial production. Many of these facts are very simple and can be easily understood and learned by children.

The third element is enormously complicated; it consists of the actual treaty provisions by which the intent of the Atlantic Charter statement is to be implemented. To determine these provisions will require the best brains of the United Nations and the consideration of extremely intricate data with reference to production, consumption, transportation, money values and the like.

The above analysis clarifies the answer to the problem of this paper, namely, what can the elementary school do to prepare for winning the peace? It is our manifest first duty in this section of our school system to go to work on the emotional background of our children. In the opinion of the writer, the previous efforts in this field have been distinctly harmful rather than helpful. They have been calculated to produce in our children a strongly nationalistic, if not actually jingoistic attitude. Our nation has been held up as the strongest in the world, with the best government and the highest standard of living existing anywhere. There is no objection to this, provided there is associated with it not the smug self-satisfaction which has been too characteristic of our national point of view in the past, but rather a sense of the international responsibilities which our fortunate position inevitably lays upon us.

It is the opinion of the writer that the provisions of the Atlantic Charter should be discussed frequently in ele-

mentary school classrooms, both incidentally in connection with classes in the social studies, and definitely in current events periods. With a study of these provisions should be coupled frequent considerations of the necessity of a democratic association of free peoples to put them into effect. Thus, children will grow up with certain emotional mind-sets which will make easy the acceptance of some points of view which are now difficult for the American people but which are essential if we are to have an enduring peace.

It may be argued that it is not necessary to expose little children to this sort of subject-matter. The answer to this contention is two-fold. First, if as it seems likely, it takes the world as long to win the peace after this war as it took it to lose the peace after the first world war, then children in our elementary schools will have become voters long before the peace is won. Second, emotional attitudes are acquired easily by younger children, and such attitudes are surprisingly permanent, coloring their thinking for many years to come.

It is obvious that our elementary schools have for a long time dealt with some aspects of the second element in solving the problem of winning the peace, namely the factual element. But here, too, the instruction needs to be changed. Geography has been losing its place in our common schools in the last few years; this movement needs to be reversed and a greater emphasis than ever before should be given to geographic education. Too frequently in the past, however, the study of geography has consisted in the enforced memorization of a vast number of unrelated facts about the various countries of the world. The geography of the future should have two main emphases.

First, it should stress the pattern of interrelationships between man and his natural environment. This point of view has been expressed many times in the last forty years, but it is still too inadequately followed in our schools which are still teaching locations, products and industries as unrelated data instead of as factors in understanding the varying ways in which man responds to his natural environment.

Second, the geography of the future must place far more stress on world relationships. We need to emphasize such

things as the world distribution of races; of such basic commodities as oil, rubber, coal, tin, iron and foodstuffs; and of transportation and supply routes. Only as we teach such types of subject matter can we hope for a group of future citizens who will understand what the terms of the peace treaty are all about.

In a democracy, it is not the peace plenipotentiaries nor the President who make the peace; in the last analysis it

is the people who do it. It is, moreover, the sentiments and will of the people, as expressed through their representatives, which modify and readjust the terms of peace as time goes on after the acceptance of the actual treaty. For the early stages of the development of an intelligent electorate who are capable of grappling with these problems the elementary teacher has a heavy and vital responsibility.