

LVII. SOME TENDENCIES IN THE POPULARITY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL SUBJECTS IN THE LAST DECADE.

H. L. Foster, Oklahoma College for Women.

Twenty four centuries ago the Weeping Philosopher, Heraclitus, enunciated as a part of his philosophy, "Change, movement, is the Lord of the universe. Everything is in a state of becoming, of continual flux." Modern science on every hand tends to conform to this idea. Even human thought and education are no exceptions to the rule. Every day new ideas, new movements, and new adjustments take place. That which does not move is soon left behind and trace is lost of it.

The particular problem of this paper is (1) to note certain changes in the popularity of some of the subjects in secondary schools, as shown by number of pupils enrolled; and (2) to attempt to point out some of the reasons for these changes. The scope of this paper is limited to the last decade. No attempt will be made to state in minute detail all of the changes that have taken place but only to show some of the tendencies that have developed.

The chief source of the statistical part of this paper was Bulletin Number 1, 1925, of the Department of Education of the State of Missouri. The reason for the selection of this material instead of other is that it was the only study of the kind available to the writer at the time this paper was written. Altho it is from a neighboring State there are certain tendencies portrayed which should be interesting to all of us and seem to be more than State-wide. We believe that like study in Oklahoma would reveal similar conditions.

Owing to the fact that the enrollment in high schools has practically doubled in the last decade it was considered more desirable for comparison to use the per cent of the school population enrolled in each department rather than the actual numbers.

Some of the departments which have shown gains ranked in the order of decrease, or the highest first and the lowest last, are: Physical education, Social Studies, Music, Science, Commercial, English, and Home Economics. The departments showing a decrease are Mathematics, Foreign Languages, Art, and Agriculture. These are also ranked according to decrease,—Mathematics showing the greatest decrease and Agriculture the least.

The results are not as dismal for the departments showing de-

creases as might seem on the surface. There are actually more people enrolled in these departments in 1925 than 1915. The per cents are lower due to the increased enrollment in the secondary schools. In other words the enrollment in the departments has not advanced proportionately to the enrollment in the schools. However the fact remains that some subjects are attracting larger numbers than others which means that some subjects are gaining in popularity while others are losing.

The value of any study lies not only in the statistics revealed but also in the underlying causes for the same. In this part of the paper no claim is made that all of the causes are enumerated. However, an attempt is made to bring some of the more patent ones to attention. These are only suggestive. Doubtless others will present themselves to your minds.

The first reason which presents itself is the increase in secondary school enrollment. In the ten years 1910 to 1920 the number of pupils attending the high schools in the United States more than doubled. The same condition is true for the decade just ended. Also the indications are that the holding power of the secondary schools is increasing. This means that a larger per cent of those who enter high school now are graduating than was true a decade ago. This condition affects the enrollment in certain subjects—especially those belonging to the last two years of the high school course.

Another reason is the attempt to be "practical" and "useful." Dr. Thomas H. Briggs' stated that "The first duty of the school is to teach pupils to do better the desirable things that they will do anyway." Sometimes this doctrine has been carried to an extreme. Like every other good thing it is subject to abuse. The writer sat in a classroom a few months ago and heard a student arguing with the teacher over a point of subject matter which was fundamental. The student presented the plea that she wanted to get something practical, e. g. go on a field trip. She said that she hated textbook knowledge. Of course the difficulty was that the student did not know enough about the subject to realize what was practical. This gives rise to the question, who is to be the judge of the usefulness of the subject matter? The aim to be practical has had its effect upon various subjects in our curriculum. For example Vocational Home Economics and Vocational Agriculture have gained while Latin and Mathematics have lost.

A third reason is individual differences. The increase in the

*The School Review, XXXI, 109-115. Feb. 1923.

secondary school enrollment has necessarily meant a greater variety of individual differences. If these people are to be admitted to our high schools provision must be made for them. In a democracy the ideal of education can be none less than the development of the individual to the limit of his mental capacity. To do this a greater variety of courses must be offered. Some boys may do well in Manual Training and poorly in English. Likewise with the girls who have trouble with Geometry but are able to master Home Economics.

A fourth reason which has had a large effect upon the popularity of subjects recently is the World War. This is particularly true with the decline of German and the increase in French and Spanish. It will be interesting to watch the language development during the next decade. Will German regain its former position at the expense of Spanish and French, or not? To attempt to give a definite answer to this question would be somewhat of a conjecture. However the indications are that German and Latin are gaining back a part of their losses.

A fifth reason which operates from the stand-point of the pupil is the difficulty or ease of a subject where free election is allowed. Sometimes pupils—secondary or college—when asked why they have selected a certain subject in preference to another will hedge but frequently the answer will be that one is easier than the other. They have no more idea of using the subject matter of certain courses they are taking than they have of attempting to do the impossible. This, of course, is in opposition to the principle of usefulness.

It is to be distinctly understood that the writer does not maintain that the tendencies on the whole are not desirable. In fact it would seem that many of them are in harmony with the best theory of the age. Never the less there is one guiding factor which all curriculum makers, administrators, and teachers must keep in mind. Very careful consideration must be given to the purposes served by each subject offered in our secondary schools. For a subject to exist it must meet a real, not hypothetical, need in the social organization of which our schools are a part.