

Adult Immigrant Education in the United States

By MARGUERITE H. BURNETT, State Director of Immigrant Education in Delaware.

ACCORDING to figures compiled by the Government Census Bureau, for 1920, the adult foreign-born population of the United States numbered fourteen million persons who were natives of forty-three different countries. Of this number, 48.6% were classified as Northern Europeans, 50.1% as Southern Europeans, and 1.3% as Asiatics. One million five hundred thousand, about 11%, could not speak or understand the English language and a still larger number, one million seven hundred thousand, about 13%, were said to be totally illiterate, that is, unable to write their names and to read in any language. Forced by ignorance of language and lack of training into unskilled and semi-skilled occupations in factories, mines, and shops, 75% were living in densely populated urban districts, where homogeneity of race, language, and religion leads to racial colonization with its perpetuation of ethnic culture and traditions and the gradual development of economic self-sufficiency and independence of other groups. In this number were included 74% of all foreign-born illiterates and 69% of all non-English-speaking adults.

Adult Immigrant Education is a broad term. It may and does include the activities of all agencies interested in the assimilation of the immigrant. In this paper, I shall treat that phase of it which may be considered the legitimate function of public educational authorities.

Ever since 1890, when the influx of the new immigration brought large groups of non-English-speaking and illiterate aliens to our shores, educators have been conscious in a greater or less degree of the educational needs of the adult alien. At ports of entry and in large industrial centers where the rapid growth of immigrant groups made the recognition of these needs imperative, the teaching of English to immigrants became a function of the public night school and classes for this purpose were organized. Except in isolated cases, the teaching in these classes was done with little or no understanding of the capacities, needs, and methods of approach to immigrant groups, and measured by its power to interest and hold pupils, it was a lamentable failure.

With the World War came a nation wide realization of America's immigrant population and the desirability and necessity for its assimilation. The process by which this assimilation was to be accomplished was known as Americanization, and many and varied were the programs put into operation for this purpose. Since a knowledge of the English language was considered a primary requisite for the process of assimilation, educational activities occupied an important place in these programs.

With the vigor and enthusiasm that characterized all war time activities, plans were formulated and promoted by federal, state, and local agencies, both public and private, to stimulate thought

and crystallize methods in the field of adult immigrant education. Although from the very nature of its inception, much done at that time was transitory in nature and reflected an interest motivated by fear of immigrant groups rather than by a belief in the desirability of their assimilation, much of permanent value was accomplished. For the first time in the history of the movement, the need of expert leadership was realized and met, and principles of organization and procedure enunciated and adopted. These principles adopted by the Interstate Council on Immigrant Education in February, 1920, and readopted by the Department of Immigrant Education of the National Education Association in 1923, state that:

- I. The education of the adult immigrant in English and citizenship is a public responsibility and should be carried on under the direction of public educational authorities.
- II. There should be no compulsion of the immigrant. You can't compel good American citizenship. If anything must be compulsory, let it be the furnishing of proper educational opportunities.
- III. Only trained teachers and skilled leaders should be permitted to engage in immigrant education. It is a task calling for the highest efficiency.
- IV. The course of study, teaching methods, and scheme of organization for classes of adult immigrants should be adapted to the ability, needs, and working condition of the pupils.
- V. The educational program should be of sufficient flexibility to provide for the introduction of such supplementary activities as will facilitate the immigrants' adjustment to life and conditions in America and provide for intelligent coöperation with other agencies.
- VI. The non-English-speaking immigrant is a problem of the local community, the state, and the nation. Hence all should share in the cost of removing the language barrier.

In the years following the war, marked progress has been made in the adoption of programs embodying these principles. Twelve states having 61% of all the non-English-speaking adult immigrants of the country are now supporting and directing state programs. Seven states having 31% of the non-English-speaking population of the country have no state supported programs, but individual cities and communities in these states make adult immigrant education a function of their public school system.

Working in conjunction with state and local public school system, is the Bureau of Naturalization of the United States

Department of Labor. This bureau carries on as part of its naturalization work an educational program intended to aid the public schools in training candidates for naturalization for responsible citizenship. The assistance given by the Bureau varies according to the needs and wishes of the community. At the present time, it consists largely of preparing and distributing free text-books to aliens preparing for naturalization. The cost of the Bureau's educational activities is met by fees collected from immigrants at the time of their entry into the country.

No direct financial support is now given by the Federal government to adult immigrant education. The cost of its maintenance is met entirely by states and local communities. The Towner-Sterling Bill, carries a large appropriation for federal aid in this particular field of education. If this bill should become a law, the appropriation would be distributed to the states on a fifty-fifty basis, according to their percentage of the foreign-born population of the country.

Trained and sympathetic leaders appreciating the need of methods of approach and procedure based upon a knowledge of immigrant groups and an appreciation of the value of their contribution to the upbuilding and enrichment of the nation, have overcome much of the faulty technique that characterized the pre-war period. Adequately trained teachers possessing a knowledge of the social background and life of the immigrant and a sympathy that begets confidence, coöperation, and a development of self-expression and power in the pupils are now required in every community.

Courses of study, methods of instruction, and systems of grading adapted to the ability, needs, and cultural life of pupils of all grades of intellectual attainment have replaced the inadequate curriculums and unsatisfactory procedure of the earlier period. California's method of meeting the needs of her advanced students is an admirable illustration of this policy of adaption. By this plan, advanced English and citizenship classes for adult immigrants will combine with representatives of women's clubs, labor unions, and other groups to study social sciences. These classes will be taught by professors supplied by the University of California. In this way, says Miss Richardson, California will follow the Tutorial Classes of England, and will substitute for fifth and sixth-grade geography, history and civics, a study of those subjects which will enable its adult immigrants to think clearly and straight in matters of government and social living, and to qualify for responsible citizenship in rapidly changing and complex civilization.

To appreciate how generally educational authorities are coöperating with immigrants in the arrangement of classes at times and places best suited to the convenience and working conditions of the