

Experiments On the Elementary Level

CL Guidance for straight thinking

Listen To Both Sides

J. CONRAD SEEGERS

FOUR SUMMERS AGO a group were studying the elementary school curriculum.¹ One teacher was concerned about her school and was convinced that it was inadequate. She told the class that the school was not adapted to the children, that it demanded of them the impossible, that they were uninterested and resentful, and she inquired what she might do.

Test results from her school proved that the children were being asked to read materials far above their level of ability. It was clear that the course of study which the teacher was asked to follow was not suited to the abilities of the children. It was further obvious that not very much had been accomplished by way of learning the school subjects. But the class went a little farther with the problem. They asked one girl what she knew about her own community and about the home life of these children.

As a matter of fact, she knew a great deal. It was a community of poorly educated people, some of whom were making what was for them a great deal of money under the artificial boom of wartime conditions. But this added income was not used to improve the

living conditions to which abject poverty had accustomed them. Most of the men spent most of the weekends celebrating with their unaccustomed wealth. It was a community which had paid very little attention to such matters as diet and cleanliness. The houses were not clean. Sanitary provisions were practically nonexistent, the diet was a typical white-meat-corn-bread-hog-and-hominy diet. There was practically no attention paid to the amenities of living. The children were poorly clad and very frankly could see no relevance in the things they were asked to do at school.

The class went to work in earnest with this teacher and her problem. They suggested that the difficulty with her school was much more far-reaching than her simple statement of the problem had suggested. It involved more than arithmetic and more than reading. It involved the very living and being of the children, and, as a matter of fact, the living and being of the parents. It was not urged that she abandon the teaching of reading and arithmetic, of writing and language, but it was suggested that she get down also to the essentials of education as the lives of these children were affected. She was given a number of very concrete recommendations and was urged to take up the whole matter with her supervisor, concerning whose willingness to go along with the program involving such radical changes she seemed highly skeptical. That was in the summer of 1942.

Lessons in Learning to Live

I saw the teacher next in the summer of 1943 and asked her what had happened. She sat down and talked to me for an hour, and at

¹ Extracts from a paper on "Guidance" read to the Elementary School Principals Dept., Pennsylvania State Education Association.

Thoughtful persons are aware of the fact that the curriculum in today's schools must be realistic. That such a curriculum can not embrace teaching the three R's alone, but must allow for the understanding of the problems of living, is pointed out by J. Conrad Seegers, associate dean, Teachers College, Temple University, Philadelphia, who cites several examples of how some teachers have aided in solving many of these problems.

the end of that hour I told her that I wanted the members of a class in elementary school social studies to hear her. She had found her supervisor not only sympathetic, but enthusiastic, and with that moral support had gone to work in furious earnest. She tackled first the problem of diet, how to plan the meals, how to cook. She introduced children to soap and sanitation in general, actually securing free samples of soap for them, and practiced cleanliness in school. She and the children planned and built model homes and rooms which could be furnished with reasonable comfort and at low cost. They studied and made clothing, showing that good taste is not always expensive. She spent a great deal of time developing an understanding of what constitutes courtesy. She arranged with a woman who lived in the neighborhood, who though poor was evidently a woman of good taste, to have the children visit her home so that they might learn how to conduct themselves on such a visit and might see in operation some of the principles they were learning in their little school.

Through the children she reached parents, who were invited to the school to make it a community center. Through these community meetings, as well as through the children, she interested the whole community in something of a clean-up movement. I am told that the use of paint and whitewash, of brooms and of rakes, reached an astonishing new high point in this community during that year.

I suggest that this is an illustration of guidance through the use of a school curriculum which is little short of thrilling. I do not often become sentimental, but no one could sit for one solid hour listening to that girl as she talked with a gleam in her eyes about these children whom she was helping to live and of those parents whose level of living she had through her own efforts lifted far beyond what many people thought was ever to be a possibility, without feeling at least a little emotional.

Opportunities For Service

Obviously not all schools require this kind of program, but the opportunity for service in terms of community relationships and the existence of problems of guidance emanating from those relationships are almost omnipresent.

When I say omnipresent, I am thinking of that colored teacher whom I knew in North Carolina two decades ago, who virtually wiped out adult illiteracy in her district by working with children and reaching their parents through them. I am thinking of that Philadelphia elementary-school principal who, seeing her district as a breeding ground for juvenile delinquency, not only talked to boys and girls, but arranged a program providing recreation for their afternoons and Saturday mornings, and later interested community leaders in the program with the result that there is now flourishing a community club for boys and girls which has done untold good in that district. I am thinking of that principal of a semi-urban school, who finding that the boys of her school satisfied their urge for self-expression largely by throwing bricks through the schoolhouse windows on Saturday or Sunday, organized those same boys into a school improvement association, which made of a part of their school yard a veritable garden spot. I am thinking of a fifth-grade teacher, who, during this last year, teaching in a school located in a congested slum area, has so focused attention upon housing and cleanliness and legitimate self-respect as to have changed conditions among the children in her classroom substantially and affected the neighborhood at least to the extent that it can be noticed.

And I am thinking of a woman, who teaching in a rural section of South Carolina two years ago, not only talked about diversification of farming and adequate diet, but with her fifth- and sixth-grade boys and girls established a program of gardening which contributed materially to the practical application of her teaching. By ordinary standards she was not a well-prepared teacher. She was woefully short on methods, visual education, use of the English language, and history, to mention just a few of her shortcomings, but she knew her people. As she put it, "I introduced them to some vegetables they had never heard of and got them raising them." It might surprise you as it surprised me to find that one of these exotica was spinach. While you may agree with me concerning the dubious value of spinach, I think you will also agree with me that the imagination, the energy, the practical application, and the burning zeal of this woman compensated for many academic gaps.

Evaluation of Results

Both of these last named teachers, in describing their programs, talked about the concomitants. They talked about the growth in language resultant from the children's having something in which they were interested about which they could talk and write. They talked about the interest in reading and the interest in each other as the children compared results in their programs of community improvement.

The teacher whose classes were drawn from the slum district is certainly preventing at least some juvenile delinquency before it happens. She is guiding children into profitable ways of thinking and helping them to realize that they must help themselves. Let us remember that much juvenile delinquency begins at elementary school age. There are studies to prove that statement. Consequently, guidance problems deriving from community relationships are in a very real sense the problems of the elementary school. The rural teacher is performing a similar service of guidance in a different setting.

Here are instances which show that guidance functioning through the warp and woof of the curriculum is desirable and possible in all sorts of schools and in all sorts of settings. They show also that it is part and parcel of the curriculum, and it is impossible if the curriculum has been decided upon rigidly, arbitrarily, mechanically, and unimaginatively in advance of the event by people who did not know the children for whom it was intended and who were thinking of education in terms of pages in a book rather than in terms of living, throbbing human beings. I am not protesting against knowledge; I am in favor of knowledge. But I am protesting against the blind worship of abstract knowledge which happily is disappearing from the elementary school scene.

We can do much in the elementary school to guide children in the development of attitudes, and attitudes are part of the very fabric of character. We can do this directly and indirectly. We can do it through the kind of subject-matter we teach and through the kind of school organization we maintain; through the kind of associations we arrange for.

Prejudices Are Not Spontaneous

No one has ever discovered at what age

children develop prejudices. I doubt that anyone ever will discover it, although there are some studies now in progress directed toward that end. It seems certain, however, that prejudices do not spring up inevitably or spontaneously. They are effects which are caused by definite causes. Prejudices against people of other races, of other religions, of other geographic areas, of other political faiths, are certainly in large measure imitative.

I suppose it is mathematically possible that a given individual might always have had unfortunate relationships with Methodists—or Democrats—or people named Jones—but it is highly unlikely. It is much more likely that if this person dislikes Methodists, or Democrats, or people named Jones, it is because he has learned from others whose emotional attitude toward these "unfavored" classes is biased or prejudiced. It is certain that the elementary-school teacher and the elementary-school principal can do much to create or to foster or to eliminate prejudices of this sort. The manner in which social problems are discussed, the very mechanics of grouping, the kinds of topics which are introduced, are the stuff out of which prejudices develop or tolerance is engendered.

Give the Other Side a Chance

Another kind of attitude, guidance which employs a quite different approach, has to do with the development of what, for lack of a better phrase, I am going to call academic tolerance. I mean by that a willingness to examine all of the facts before forming opinions, a willingness to hear the other side. I do not mean by it an absence of opinion or taking no stand at all on anything. Again let me illustrate by use of an instance.

A seventh-grade boy is talking to a class about prejudice against and mistreatment of minority groups. He is using as his instance the exclusion of Orientals from citizenship and he is reading an article which bolsters his views. After he finishes the reading, he asks other members of the class what they think. Most of them agree, but one young man, aged twelve, when asked for his opinion, said, "I don't know. I have heard only one side. You have told us what you think. I don't know what effect this might have on business in California. I haven't heard the other side of the case and I just don't want to make up my mind before I have."

I think this indicative of pretty straight thinking on the part of the twelve-year-old philosopher, but I was even more impressed by the reply of the first boy. He said, "Jack, I believe you're right. I have talked only one side of this case, and maybe I'd better do a little more thinking myself." The teacher, a wise woman, in a very unostentatious way, made a good deal of this situation and clinched the thought.

This is a kind of guidance this country

needs tremendously. We are bombarded by slogans, we read advertisements, we listen to politicians over the radio and on the platform, we read newspapers which present their sides through editorials and not infrequently by their very make-up. If every American citizen of normal intelligence or better had been so guided in the elementary school as to insist on hearing both sides of the case before he made up his mind, this country of ours would have been vastly improved.

❏ *Blazing new trails in education*

School Camping All Year 'Round

VIRGIL M. ROGERS

ST. MARY'S LAKE CAMP is a cooperative enterprise. The initial outlay was made by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation which has so generously continued to give its financial and moral support to the project. The camp, staff, and facilities have been made available to school children in Calhoun County during the past two years.

The schools in the county cooperate by sending fifth- and sixth-grade groups under the supervision of teachers to the camp for periods of two weeks. Parents cooperate by providing a small fee for board. In the Battle Creek schools, provision has been made through the Willard Trust Fund for assuring every fifth- and sixth-grade boy and girl a camping experience even though his parents may not be in a position to bear the one dol-

lar per day cost for board. The plan is so arranged that students are not aware of any subsidy for campers on the part of the school.

The camp site is an interesting one in that it is rich in Indian lore. Located along the shores of St. Mary's Lake, it is on a beautiful sloping wooded hill only a few miles from the city of Battle Creek, and is well equipped with a modern central administration building and excellent cottages. During a two-weeks' camping session approximately seventy elementary boys and girls are housed in comfortable cottages accommodating about twenty children and a counselor.

The camp operated straight through the winter months and the children and sponsors have been greatly pleased with the results. It was a rather novel experiment. January weather in Michigan can be "rugged" indeed, but it did not dampen the enthusiasms of the young campers. Snowshoeing, tobogganing, skiing, skating, tracking animals in fresh snow, and hiking through a winter wonderland of deep woods blanketed in carpets of white ermine, were never to be forgotten hours of winter camp. Ice and snow; rising and falling temperatures; moisture and its mischievous antics in a cold climate; nature's protective measures for trees, plants, animals, and wild fowl; starry heavens on clear winter nights; gatherings about the log fire in the big fire-

Camping as a part of the school curriculum provides a setting for the development of skills and understandings not available in the average classroom situation. Living together at close range for twenty-four hours a day puts a premium on democratic living. Its place in the educational program for today and the future is set forth in this article on winter camping. In a brief survey, Virgil Rogers, superintendent of schools, Battle Creek, Michigan, outlines some of the activities carried on in a camping project sponsored by the schools in that area.

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