

Problems of a Beginning Core Teacher

GORDON F. VARS

What particular problems must a beginning teacher face in conducting a core program? These problems are discussed by Gordon F. Vars, teacher of ninth-grade core and also audio-visual coordinator at Bel Air Junior-Senior High School, Bel Air, Maryland.

A BEGINNING TEACHER, no matter how thorough his preparation may be, has to meet and solve many problems during his first year. While many of these problems are common to all teachers, some seem to be more challenging to teachers working under a core system than under a more traditional program. Until more teacher-education institutions design programs for core teachers, newcomers will have to learn many core techniques as they go along. This article has been written to point out some of the situations for which a prospective core teacher should prepare if he is to reap more fully the rewards of this stimulating kind of school work.

The kinds of problems which a new teacher encounters depend upon both his background and the situation in which he teaches. The writer went through a "progressive" college where he became accustomed, as a student, to teacher-pupil planning, self-evaluation and many other learning procedures which are part of modern democratic education. A year of graduate work made further study of core theory possible, as well as detailed observation of the program of an outstanding laboratory school. All this added up to rather exceptional preparation for teaching in a core program.

ORGANIZATION OF CORE PROGRAM

Core courses at Bel Air High School, where the writer taught his first year, consist of a three-hour block of time in the seventh and eighth grades, and two hours in the ninth. During this time students develop some of the understandings and skills usually associated with English, social studies and science, although the actual learning experiences are developed through teacher-pupil planning and without regard for subject matter boundaries. Units of work are usually chosen from within areas explored some years ago by Maryland teachers at state and county workshops,¹ although the teacher is not restricted to these suggested units. Extensive use is made of audio-visual aids, field trips, library research, arts and crafts projects, and current periodicals. There is a great deal of group work, usually culminating in such things as oral reports, panel discussions and dramatizations.

In addition to unit study, the core class functions as a home room unit for student council representation,

¹For a description of the Maryland program see: Devilbiss, Wilbur, "Working with an Evolving Junior High School Program—On the State Level," *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, Vol. xxxi, No. 116, (April 1917), p. 82-8.

intramural sports, and attendance. Mathematics, music, home economics, industrial arts, physical education and science (ninth grade) are outside the core and taught by specialists in those areas. The core teacher serves as guidance counsellor, and four times a year, after consulting the special subject teachers, sends letter-type reports home to parents. Only satisfactory (S) and unsatisfactory (U) grades are given and these are based upon the child's performance in relation to his ability.²

²For a description of the Harford County, Maryland, program, see: Hardesty, R. Bowen, "Working with an Evolving Junior High School Program in a Local Unit," *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals*, Vol. xxxi, No. 146, (April 1947), p. 86-95.

Mudd, Dorothy, *A Core Program Grows*. Bel Air, Maryland: Board of Education of Harford County, 1949.

The senior high school operates in a conventional manner, with various curricula, required and elective courses.

A big advantage of this type of program is the longer period of time students spend with one teacher.³ In this way, the teacher gets to know each child much better, making it easier to plan learning experiences that will meet individual needs. The writer noticed this particularly in contrasting his understanding of his core class with either of the one-hour-per-day science classes he taught. Freed from the limitations of the single period, a teacher can more readily adjust the children's work according to their capacity for sustained interest. Vital discussions

³Alberty, Harold, *Reorganizing the High School Curriculum*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948, p. 154-5.



Courtesy, Ralph Morgan, Harford County Schools

Member of a student panel uses large graph to illustrate an idea.

need not be cut off in order to change classes, and more effective use can be made of field trips, audio-visual aids and library work.

Variety Needed in Program

Effective use of this time, however, often challenges the newcomer. Ingenuity is often taxed to the utmost to make sure there is sufficient variety in the day's program. The writer found he tended to let his eighth graders continue too long at one kind of activity, so that they became fatigued, lost interest and developed discipline problems. Only after learning to recognize the little signs by which a group of children shows its loss of interest was he able to change activities before trouble developed. Since moods change from day to day and from hour to hour, the teacher must be alert and build up resources of ideas with which to direct these necessary changes of activity.

Because of the limited attention span of junior high school youngsters, the writer found he could not expect much more than an hour of sustained work upon the unit by his class. This left at least half the core period for which other worth-while activities had to be planned.

Another problem was that the extreme flexibility of teacher-pupil-planned core activities left children somewhat insecure because they had few definite assignments from day to day. It seemed necessary to provide some routine to the week's schedule to give the children something to "hang on to" while experimenting with the freedom of democratic group work.

To provide this routine structure, put more variety into the daily pro-

gram and introduce worth-while non-unit activities, the writer planned with his students a series of special events. One day each week might include time for current events, either by reading newspapers or discussing a radio news broadcast picked up on the wire recorder. Another day might bring a free reading period or visit to the library, and another a final spelling review or test. Class meetings, hobby periods and other special activities were fitted into a regular schedule which was revised from time to time, but which remained constant long enough for each child to know what was coming each day of the week. This gave the week's work a pattern, and still allowed plenty of time for work on the unit.

In addition to the problem of schedule making, the beginning teacher has much to learn about planning activities that will meet individual and group needs of the children. Core teaching usually involves much committee work for locating information and planning projects. This gives great flexibility and makes it easier to fit an "assignment" to the needs and abilities of the child. A child may exercise considerable choice over what he undertakes, with the teacher guiding him into challenging, but not frustrating, undertakings.

Committee work also promotes desirable social development and skill in democratic procedures, and thus may be the most important phase of school experience. Children learn the value of cooperation and the contributions all types of people can make to a group project. One need only look at the organizations about him to see how vitally needed is the ability to work effectively in groups.

Effective Use of Information

While these benefits derive from the *process* of working in groups, the problem still remains of making effective use of information located, organized and presented by committees. Is it enough for children just to listen to a report? This might be satisfactory when all students are highly motivated, but such is very rarely the case. Frequently children must absorb a good deal of information before they even become aware of a problem. Motivation is particularly difficult if the unit of study is not well adapted to the needs and maturity level of the group. A beginning teacher lacks experience in discovering problems and concerns of his class, but even should he succeed in developing a unit of great interest for the children, the simple oral report cannot insure that a basic minimum of information is retained as a foundation for further learning.

The writer found that a partial solution to this problem lay in careful checking at all stages of group work. Clear-cut and well-defined goals were essential, as well as frequent progress reports. Requiring each group to make a bibliography was a further check and enabled the teacher to suggest further resources. By having each committee submit a detailed fact outline of the results of its study, the teacher made sure that essential facts had been found and organized so others could understand them. Insistence upon using illustrative material such as maps, drawings, charts, models, hand-made lantern slides and chalk-board diagrams made it more likely that the committee would get its message across. Movies, film-

strips, recordings and projected opaque materials were used when appropriate, and verbal presentations were vitalized by means of dramatizations, panels, quizzes and the like. In other words, student committees were helped to use the best of modern teaching methods in their presentations.

As a further step toward permanent learning, each committee's fact outline was duplicated or copied from the chalk-board into each child's notebook, and additional information that came out in the discussion period was jotted down in the margins. These outlines were used by the teacher as bases for tests, quizzes and examinations, with frequent reviews, word games, "quiz-bees" and drills to give the necessary "over-learning." By proper attention to these techniques the core teacher can make sure that his students are mastering essential factual information while at the same time reaping the benefits of democratic processes of learning.

Evidence of Progress Provided

In line with modern concern for the needs of each individual child, scores on tests, quizzes and examinations were not used for comparative grading. They did, however, give the teacher some idea of how material was getting across, and provided each child with some evidence of progress. Most of the activities by which children learn democratic participation in group effort provide little concrete evidence of achievement. Too much of this activity may leave the student with a feeling that he is not really learning anything. As teachers we must constantly emphasize the importance of learning to get along

well with people, of choosing wisely between conflicting value patterns, and of solving group problems cooperatively. At the same time, however, we must make sure that the child has something tangible to show for his time in school. He may be making great strides in developing leadership ability as chairman of a committee, but unless he can show his parents a "near-perfect" spelling paper or an essay commended by his teacher, he may feel he is getting nowhere and his parents may be convinced that all he does in school is play.

Until we can demonstrate concretely a child's growth in such things as social sensitivity, tolerance, self-reliance and the like, even the most flexible core system needs plenty of drill-type material to provide evidence of achievement. To be most meaningful, this material should be based upon needs and deficiencies uncovered in carrying on the core unit. The problem is not one of putting skill work into the core, but of exploiting the rich possibilities already there. Where the development of a skill is necessary for the attainment of a larger objective, motivation is much easier. Errors are usually common enough to justify giving the whole class certain types of exercises, with special attention where needed.

A Free and Flexible Program

Letter writing took on new meaning when used in correspondence with pen-pals overseas or in writing for material concerning a committee assignment.

Language drills were based upon mistakes found in the children's own papers, and new words were used for spelling and vocabulary-building exercises. Reports and panels played back on the wire recorder motivated drill in spoken English, and the making of charts and bulletin board displays demonstrated the need for neatness and care in lettering and drawing. In these ways the "fundamentals" can be approached with new vigor and enthusiasm when studied as tools for the attack on significant student problems, while at the same time they supply concrete evidence of achievement.

The very freedom and flexibility which make a core program such a promising way to meet the needs of all American youth create certain problems for the beginning teacher. He must learn to use the longer block of time without losing student interest and enthusiasm, and to include enough weekly routine to provide security. He must promote development of the skills of democratic participation, while at the same time insuring mastery of a basic amount of factual information. He must ever be aware of the needs, problems, concerns and even temporary moods of the group he teaches. None of these problems are insuperable for teachers with courage and imagination and an honest desire to help children acquire the best possible education. For those who meet these qualifications, core teaching offers one of the most satisfying and exciting fields of endeavor.

Copyright © 1951 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.