

It Can Happen

H. H. GILES

A WISE SUPERVISOR recently remarked, "Surely it would seem that older students could share in planning and evaluating their own work since children in the primary grades do it so well." Her remark was made in reference to a faculty dispute over methods of teaching. On one side of that dispute were those who sincerely, earnestly, and a little bitterly objected to teacher-pupil planning and felt insecure at the thought of attempting it. They offered arguments to the effect that it resulted in too much freedom for students, that standards were lowered, that the orderly process of subject-matter mastery was disrupted and that only a lazy teacher would leave it to students to make important decisions.

During the course of the discussion, those who opposed the method of group planning, work and evaluation at the elementary level raised objections and questions like these:

"The children run wild."

To some people, teacher-pupil planning is just a lot of "pretty talk." And group planners—in their enthusiasm for cooperative effort—sometimes lose sight of well-meant criticism of their methods. H. H. Giles of West Georgia College, Carrollton, brings together in this article arguments both for and against student participation in planning and, through careful analysis of the strongholds of both sides, leads us logically to the conclusion that group planning is fundamental to education in a democracy.

"When do they learn the three R's?"

"What would the next teacher say if my students were not required to cover certain minimum essentials?"

"I just don't believe in it!"

"Parents want their children to go to a teacher who knows something, not to a teacher who has to ask help from her pupils."

"It may work for some people, but it doesn't work for me. I tried it for several weeks and I can't teach that way."

"The administration doesn't approve of it."

These objections and questions were heart-felt and were expressed with the tone of voice which implies, "I dare you to prove me wrong!" During the hot dispute, a professor of science rose to assert:

"When students are given a share in planning they choose things which interest them rather than what is good for them. To give boys and girls academic credit for having a good time rather than following the course of study is downright dishonest!"

This particular discussion was more heated than others, perhaps, but it was one of many in the institution referred to and is representative of several things which are worth serious study and reply.

Where Do You Stand?

Consider the assertion, "I don't believe in it!" Any number of people do

not believe in cooperative planning. All who believe in authoritarianism are against it. Group planning which invites all members to participate in defining problems and methods of attacking them is a denial of external authority and an affirmation of faith in the intelligence of those present. There are many elements in our culture which are opposed to the belief in the development of all through participation in thinking. Graduate schools do not generally invite their students to practice group planning; political parties do not open their inner councils to all the membership; high school and grade school teachers rely to a considerable extent on the authority of a textbook; and parents in many cases feel free to impose their will "because I say so."

This is a serious matter because these are times in which the authoritarian position is crucial in the world. In the Nazi school it has never been healthy to question authority. If the war has any meaning whatever, it is found in the issue of authoritarianism, of special privilege for some, as opposed to the participation and free development of all.

Therefore, the teacher who does not believe in pupil participation in thinking about why, what, and how to use school time is quite in line with the authoritarian concepts which, both in the past and the present, have dominated life and education in much of the world. That teacher is true to the accepted pattern of training in paternalistic homes and in classical education.

It is not many years since the idea of "learning by doing" was elaborated into a philosophy by John Dewey, though the practice is as old as man, particu-

larly outside of formal education. Its effectiveness is one reason why employers have preferred workers who learned on the job. Yet American education, supposedly democratic, has frequently provided the spectacle of large-scale efforts to "teach" without offering pupils experience in thinking or in doing things for themselves.

Ask Yourself . . .

Thus, for the teacher who inquires concerning effective methods of education, there are two questions raised: (1) Do you truly believe in the ability of every human being to grow? (2) Do you believe that growth takes place most efficiently through first-hand experience?

If the answer is *No* to the first of these, then rigid standards and pre-conceived ideas of course content are a natural result, for the aim of education becomes in a large measure the weeding-out of the unfit.

If the answer is *No* to the second of these, then lectures and textbooks become ends in themselves. Memorization and regurgitation are elevated to a high position. The humble, faltering, often unexpected results of practical experiments in group thinking and work are made to seem reprehensible rather than educational.

If these questions are answered affirmatively, if the teacher has real faith in the ability of all to grow, and in the value of first-hand experience, then there yet remain many difficulties. Democracy is not easy! Some of the difficulties are indicated by the following questions:

"How can the teacher plan with the children to get the things they need?"

"What differences in procedure are necessary for different age levels?"

"Wouldn't it be better to learn the facts and skills first—then apply them?"

"How do you avoid substituting the guidance of leading students for that of the teacher?"

"How can you give grades on the basis of individual progress rather than on standard tests and group norms?"

"What is the place of books and other traditional materials of learning in group-planned teaching?"

"What kind of pre-planning is necessary?"

An Adventure in Discovery

To such questions as these there are some general answers which may be of service. But it can be said with confidence that there are no final answers which will apply equally to every case. The democratic way of life and education supposes unique qualities in individual human beings, unique factors in situations, and unique solutions to problems. It does not lend itself to fixed and easy answers. Thus the process of growth in the classroom is a perpetual adventure in new discovery of the uses of intelligence. The generalizations which are to be given here must be continually changed as teachers and pupils discover new interests and capabilities.

At present, it seems well warranted from the experience of scores of groups to make the following general statement in answer to the questions above.

Group planning is most successful when it is preceded by a period of work, assigned by the teacher, during which all members of the group get acquainted and establish a basis for mutual respect.

When group planning begins, experience shows that it is most effective where the following conditions exist:

1. Extensive and careful pre-planning by the teacher, including careful thinking about purpose, worthwhile topics, limitations, and possibilities of material and personnel.

2. Use of the pre-planning chiefly as a basis for questions which will stimulate student thinking rather than to provide quick answers.

3. A teacher attitude (based on faith in the potential growth of ability of students) which invites genuine and widespread participation.

4. A wide variety of problems and purposes of study explored.

5. A final determination of study area broad enough to include the real interests of all members of the group.

6. A clear definition of the major and minor study areas, so carefully thought out that intensive work is demanded for the solution of vital problems.

7. Use of all the available resources of the environment which are most pertinent to the problem, e.g., printed materials, laboratories, radio and other news sources, people of experience in the field.

8. Continuous planning and evaluation as the work progresses, and changes made as the actual work proves them necessary. (This means providing students with opportunity and encouragement to re-think their purposes and procedures and to state new ideas frankly.)

9. Evaluation which takes into account the original purpose, the achievement of the group as a whole, and the contributions of individuals of all types and degrees of importance.

Responsibility and Growth

To state these principles more specifically in relation to the questions given: The teacher has a responsibility for knowing how to plan, what sources of information are available, what the students are like, and what the difficulties and limitations may be. Some of this information will come from previous experience, but much from the actual process of planning and from observing a particular group of children at work.

In the case of young children, the planning and discussions may be briefer, the responsibilities less heavy than with older students. But in either case, the big point is to find out all the ideas the children have, to give them the experience of weighing them and trying out their ideas, to help them see greater meanings and possibilities by skillful questions, silences, suggestions, uses of material, time, and space.

As age and experience increase, so will the possibilities of work and of independent responsibility. But at all ages, children have genuine interests, worries, and abilities. As Comenius said, "everything in its time." The good teacher knows each child, knows the temper of the group as such, strives to be an artist in the timing of activities. The good teacher is a fellow student to pupils, a fellow student whose greater knowledge of techniques is used to aid development, but is not used to supplant first-hand discovery. The good teacher does not attempt to impose by force either the rate or the direction of internal growth.

The teacher who listens to children hears many questions which can become

the basis for study. Some are about themselves, some about the great world. All of them can lead to the use of many methods of work, many kinds of materials for study, many forms of presenting results, serious effort to judge results accurately and to continue planning more effectively.

Living as the Course of Study

Many of the things children "really need" are the things which children already are asking questions about when the classroom is a happy, free place where all respect each other as persons. The problems of daily life are the true course of study. Science and arts materials are aids to solving these problems. Facts and skills are acquired best as the natural result of genuine desire to accomplish a purpose, to solve a real problem.

If students are capable of thinking and directing themselves, it is stultifying to their growth to deny them the opportunity. If the problems for study are real to the students, they will impose their own discipline, approaching the problem with clear understanding and effective use of materials and techniques. Who shall say what is a real and challenging problem to a student better than he himself?

In a sense, it is almost absurd that it should be necessary to urge school-teachers to give their pupils opportunity to think. Yet that is what is being done by this argument for student-teacher planning. It is precisely the purpose of group planning to increase the extent, the depth, and the desire to think: the desire, by making the pupil a responsible partner in the job of relating his study to his interests, curiosities, prob-

lems, and previous experience; the depth, by the demands which a real problem rather than an artificial, teacher, or text-dictated problem make; the extent, by facing the student with the task of defining as far as possible for himself the Why and the How of his problems, instead of doing this hard work for him. The extent, also, by making clear how scientific method, concepts of quantity and relation, the recorded thoughts of man—all the material now divided into subject fields (for the convenience of the specialist)—can be applied to the understanding and solution of problems in the daily living of each of us.

There is no issue concerning the idea that problem solving is the basis of mental and emotional development. There seems to be an issue as to whether an outside authority or a pupil and his teacher best know what problems are real and important to a pupil at a given moment.

If there are doubts as to the validity of the idea that all growth and development are highly personal in form and meaning, there are now available a number of sound, substantiating studies.¹ If there are doubts regarding the validity of starting with a whole problem instead of with facts and skills, other studies can answer them.² If there are doubts concerning the ability and re-

sponsibility of students thus challenged to think for themselves, see the record of youth in the war and the testimony of teachers who have described their work in current educational journals.³

Look About You

Or, look about you. In the rural county of Georgia where the author now lives, as formerly in the large city high schools he has observed, children choose important things to do when they are given opportunity and wise, friendly help. Examples from the schools of this county are many.

Here is a first grade which has committees for cleaning the room and which produces plays, sings folk songs, counts money; a fifth grade which runs a co-operative store; a seventh-eighth grade which plans hot lunch menus; a ninth grade which builds a lunchroom, makes a community survey, plants a school garden, paints its classroom, builds play equipment; a fifth-sixth grade which investigates the costs and design and successfully aids in the promotion of a cooperative sweet potato curing house, plants grass and shrubs; a seventh-eighth grade which studies avidly our good neighbors in South America and our allies in Russia, makes extensive study of local health problems, establishes a school clinic, works on malaria control and aids an author in process of writing a book on the terrestrial universe.

¹ Allport, Gordon: *Personality, a Psychological Interpretation*, New York, Henry Holt, 1937.

Plant, J. S.: *Personality and the Cultural Pattern*, New York, The Commonwealth Fund, 1937.

"The Child, the Clinic and the Court," *New Republic*, New York, 1925.

Rogers, C. R.: *Psychotherapy, a Method of Counseling*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1942.

² Wheeler, R. H., and Perkins, F. T.: *Principles of Mental Development*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1932.

³ See also the list of questions recorded by one teacher of junior high school social science (Giles, H. H.: *Teacher-pupil Planning*, New York, Harper, 1941, pp. 259-284) and "University School, An Inventory of the Personal and General Social Problems of 256 Students in Grades Seven to Twelve Inclusive," Columbus, Ohio, Ohio State University School, 1940.

Though it is never easy to promote the maximum growth of *all* students, even in schools where weather conditions and the frequent moving of tenant farmer families cause irregular attendance, these activities go on and are testimony to the fact that through shared thinking there is intellectual adventure and rich practical results. The precise details of method will vary with the teacher's knowledge and skill. Basically, the method is as simple as asking the following questions, effectively and continuously:

What, Who, and When?

What do we need to do? What do we need to know? Who should do what, when? What do we need to work with? How shall we divide the tasks? Who can help us most?

And—as the job is under way and when it is done—What was well done? What was not so well done? What did we get out of it? What next?

It has been the experience of many teachers that students take these questions seriously and seek answers eagerly and effectively, according to their actual ability and experience. The most difficult part of the job is probably to overcome a long training in the belief that the teacher must do the thinking for students. Another difficulty is to find ways of reaching all the students and getting discussion started. Here is where careful pre-planning can provide many stimulating leads in the form of questions which will pique interest and lead to serious consideration of values.

What Can We Expect?

Finally, the method of group planning is rarely 100 per cent successful. It is likely to show very plainly who

the loafers and non-cooperators are. In fact it seems to reveal weaknesses more than other methods, where, as one administrator put it, "Seventy per cent of the students get by through doing a minimum of work and keeping quiet." When an individual is responsible for carrying out part of a group plan and does not do so, the results are highlighted. This is probably a good thing because it shows the teacher where her greatest efforts must be put.

In addition, it is doubtful whether any method whatever is more than 70 to 80 per cent effective at a given time. As has been pointed out, human development is a highly individual matter and schools in general require a good deal of group treatment. The expectations of parents and of schools themselves are often beyond the possibilities. The aim of democracy—the maximum development of *all*—requires a long, difficult process of growth. It requires the utmost application of science and art on the part of the teacher and is the only social ideal which aims so high.

The methods of democracy, particularly the means of obtaining general participation in thinking, are far from well-established. It requires, therefore, a pioneer spirit and the secure foundation of a concerted belief on the part of a faculty group to put this high ideal into practical operation. It is easier to follow in the traditional paths of authoritarianism. Only the teacher who truly believes in the goal should even begin the attempt to make the classroom a place for adventures in cooperative thinking and original discovery. But for that teacher who believes in democracy, group planning has possibilities. It *can* happen.

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