

Tools for Learning

HELPING BOYS AND GIRLS UNDERSTAND OUR TIMES

AGNES SNYDER

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times—it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness—"¹

IF DICKENS thus characterized 1775, what would he have said of 1944? Probably he would have found a stronger word than "foolishness." But his words as they stand are very apt for our times; apt, too, in their paradoxical import, in indicating why the problem of helping boys and girls to understand our times is so very difficult.

Understanding comes for most of us through action. This is particularly true in times of confusion; particularly true of the young. There are few among us who can successfully grapple with the underlying problems of the war in all their economic and psychological ramifications. But the more intelligent effort we put into the solution of the problems the war has brought into our own homes and our own communities, the more able becomes our citizenship in sharing in the solution of the larger problems. This is equally true of boys and girls. The first step in their understanding of our times is taken when they participate in the solution of some problem the times have brought to them.

There is plenty to do; there are plenty of problems to solve. In many schools

the problem of shortage of kitchen and janitorial help is being solved by the children taking over the work. Similarly, the shortage of help in homes and communities is being solved by children helping in stores, running errands, caring for younger children. Handled wisely, with reference to the growth needs of the children, such participation in responsible service is not only the entering wedge into understanding of our times but gives, in addition, that identification with the times which is essential in self-realization.

The deeper understanding comes as the immediate activity leads boys and girls into contacts with others engaged in similar activities. A group of children running a clothing exchange using cash for purchases finds that another group manages on a point credit system. Groups of children in different schools exchange games and stories they use with younger children on the playground. Through meeting in Junior Defense and Red Cross activities acquaint-

This month's "Tools for Learning" is devoted to the topic, "Helping Boys and Girls Understand Our Times." Introducing the section is Agnes Snyder of The Mills School, New York City. "Understanding," writes Miss Snyder, "comes for most of us through action. The first step in understanding our times is taken when we participate in the solution of some problem the times have brought to us."

¹ Opening words of Charles Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*.

May We Ask For Your Help

On the last page of this issue of *Educational Leadership* you will find listed the subjects being discussed this year in "Tools for Learning," the section of the magazine devoted to new instructional materials and their uses. We should like now to begin making plans for "Tools for Learning" for the year 1944-45. Since this section of *Educational Leadership* aims to serve you, we hope you will let us know what topics you would like to have discussed in "Tools for Learning" in the future. Please send your suggestions to *Educational Leadership*, Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, N.E.A. Washington 6, D. C.

ance is broadened, and there is expansion of ideas and increase of human understanding. Inevitably, dealing with practical problems whole-heartedly, there will come questioning of the "why" of all this—of the scarcity of things that had always been abundant, of the sources of supply, of what would happen if all the sugar or meat should be used up, of why we can't have peace, of why men must fight, of differences in people, of why people hate each other, of why some people are poor and some are rich, etc., etc.

When questioning of fundamentals begins then comes the opportunity for so helping boys and girls to seek answers that each experience will take them further along the road to under-

standing. It is then that they can be taught to collect facts, to examine them objectively, to reach conclusions, and, above all, to abide by these conclusions. Even the youngest boys and girls in the grades, within the limits of their experience, can be taught to approach the problems of living in the spirit and with the techniques of scientific inquiry. If they are to understand the present it is essential that no time be lost in helping them along that scientific road by which so much of truth has been found.

There are times when we would have boys and girls walk that other road by which men have reached understanding. It is the road of the artist, the prophet, the dreamer, the seeker after values—of all those who have concern over the meanings of things and events and would share their vision with others. All these have asked the questions boys and girls are asking today—of war and peace, of poverty and riches, of scarcity and abundance, of life and death—have asked and found answers.

"The best of times, the worst of times . . ."—1775 was but an episode, one of many episodes before and since in the persistent struggle between those who would have all men free and those who would enslave vast quantities of man to do their bidding. 1944—and the many episodes, mounting in scope and intensity—has reached a climax. It is the climax of the epic drama of the human race. The characters include all men; the stage, all earth. This is the ultimate understanding of our times into which all of us—boys and girls, men and women—must come if the forces of freedom shall triumph.

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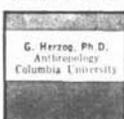
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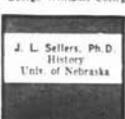
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