

Understanding Each Other

GRACE MAGEE

ANGERED by an effusive lecture on the value of knowing the child, a much-enduring teacher exclaimed:

"I have 278 youngsters in my classes. I can't possibly get to know each one, and it is ridiculous to say that I can."

Her outburst voiced the truth, too often ignored by those expounding educational theory, that the instruction of more than two hundred children a day leaves scant leisure for the study of the *whole child*. The situation is worse than the number implies, for the school turnover is enormous. In some schools the program sends a new group to every class, every term; in many, there is a complete shift with every school year. Seldom, indeed, are teacher and pupil together beyond three terms, or at most four.

The teacher's problem is paralleled by that of counselors, vice-principals, and principals, who, though they usually pay ardent tribute to the need

for knowing the student body, actually know fewer pupils than the average teacher, and, by reason of their positions, their acquaintance is generally confined to the extremes—the problem youngsters who are sent to the office and the school leaders, officers, outstanding athletes, and service groups.

A Plan and a Place

Can such a situation be improved? Is it possible for teachers and administrators to know the children with whom they deal without disrupting or relaxing the regular routine of instruction and administration? One junior high school in Los Angeles with an enrollment ranging from fifteen hundred to eighteen hundred has been experimenting with the problem for several years. It has formulated a scheme, the essence of which lies in two things—a definite plan and a center for carrying it out. The plan has been the systematic accumulation of information about the pupil and the presentation of that information to all teachers who instruct him; the center has been the home-room, where the child may feel himself a significant member of a group which he knows intimately.

When a B7 class enters the school, it is divided into home-rooms of about four pupils each. The home-room teacher receives the cards from elementary schools and the records of the

Over-crowded and under-staffed schools are certainly not to be condoned. But ignoring their problems won't help either. We would probably all agree that it is not sound educational practice to expect one teacher to teach 278 students, and we would use all our efforts to alter such a situation. But until a change can be made, we need to find ways of working effectively, even under unfavorable conditions. Grace Magee, a teacher in the Thomas Starr King Junior High School in Los Angeles, describes a plan by which her school is succeeding in making each child feel an intimacy with his school in spite of the fact that he is one of more than fifteen hundred students.

children's ages. Soon the school counselor sends her the I. Q. of every child. Within three weeks, the social living teacher has given reading tests, the mathematics teacher tests in arithmetic reasoning and fundamentals. As quickly as possible the school doctor examines each child and writes a brief report. Results are forwarded to the home-room teacher, who meanwhile has been gathering material necessary for filling out the permanent record cards which are a part of the Los Angeles city school system's dossier on all pupils. This information is purely formal—place of birth, number of brothers and sisters, occupation of father and mother, and similar data.

An Information Exchange

But information often remains on records which, human nature being what it is, no one finds the time to consult. To obviate this, a meeting is scheduled for the teachers who have one group of students in the major fields—mathematics, history, English (the last two often combined as social living), and the exploratory course set for the group. Teachers of elective subjects, such as shop or home economics, are asked to send written reports about their pupils, and later the home-room teacher gives them any material she thinks they would find helpful. The meeting is held during the regular school day, as a rule during the free period of the home-room teacher. Classes of other teachers at the meeting are supervised by instructors having that period free.

Generally, the gathering place is the principal's office. In preparation, the principal has spent a class period with

the student group, observed their work, and talked with them about their experiences in the new school, their hobbies, indeed, about anything which will bring response from individual pupils, and thus enable her to become acquainted with as many as possible.

At the meeting, the home-room teacher makes a brief summary of what she has learned; the median I.Q. and range, the median age and range, the average reading ability, the group standing in mathematics, the general family background, the number of broken homes, the number where both parents work, the children who have been reported as health problems. The academic part of her report—the I.Q. list, the age list, the test results—has been arranged on typed or mimeographed sheets, and one is given to each teacher.

The home-room teacher gives her opinion of the group as a whole, and asks the judgment of the other teachers on its attitude, preparation, and accomplishment during the weeks in the new school. Next, she names those who came listed as problems by the elementary schools, or whose tests indicate school difficulty, or who may have been mentioned to her disapprovingly by other teachers, and asks for comments. Emphasis is laid on comments which state the problem clearly, or indicate some tangible step towards meeting it. Then those who brought an outstanding record or who test exceptionally high are mentioned. Are they fulfilling their promise of accomplishment? Finally, the names of the remaining pupils on the class list are read, and teachers are asked to report on their progress.

The commendations and criticisms from the meeting are reported to the children they concern by the home-room teacher. If the praise is high, or the blame serious, word is sent to the home. Where there is grave discrepancy between test record and class performance, a re-test is arranged. Records of grave complaints are kept, and if a child shows signs of becoming a problem, the principal sees him at once.

The teachers present at the meeting are not the result of chance programming. When possible, the principal, who knows her teachers, has selected those who are friends or who work well together. If feasible, the home-room teacher has the student group for a subject as well as for home-room. At all events, the principal has made assignments with a tentative program for the following years in mind, for the school policy is to keep a group in the same home-room the entire junior high school period, and with the same teacher in a major field for one, two, and often three years. Thus, through collaboration and sharing of information, those teachers will gain knowledge of their pupils difficult to attain alone.

Developing Group Feeling

The meeting for studying the B7 group is only the first of a series, for one is scheduled for each semester. The procedure is similar each time, and questions such as might arise from the health report are always considered. But the personnel of the teacher group changes as different staff members instruct B7 and as various ones, perhaps all, of the administrators are present. Some years the aim has been to have all administrators familiar with every

group of students; again each one has concentrated on a particular grade section.

The emphasis of the meeting also changes. The major goal in B7 is to acquaint all teachers with the capacities and nature of the group, but in A7 the chief objective is socialization. Is the child working well with his fellows? Has he made friends? Does he feel himself a part of the group and of the school? Is he reaching out towards community interests? In preparation for the meeting with other teachers, the home-room teacher has observed closely the behavior and reactions of the child. She has made use of personality quizzes, hobby talks and exhibits, programs, and simple parties. Above all, she has sought to gain the confidence of the child, to encourage him to talk freely to her as a friend; for the home-room is to the school what the family is to the community.

The teacher has emphasized from the beginning the unity of the group, the realization that the accomplishment of one is the pride of all, the difficulty of the individual the concern of his classmates. And as she grows to know them, she helps them to know each other, for she is aware that in most instances the closest friendships are formed among children in the same home-room. Group feeling is furthered by the school practice of having competition in most contests by home-rooms; the children speedily learn the reputation of various groups and become concerned about their own. Participation in Red Cross drives, war work, and similar activities help them to relate school and national interests.

Acquaintance with the home is a

great help in understanding children. Such acquaintance begins in the B7. All mothers are invited to a tea where the aims of the school are explained. Often the home-room teacher has a small group of the mothers of her own children to tea or luncheon at the school. Where there is difficulty with an individual child, the mother is invited to come to school to discuss the problem with the home-room teacher and the other teacher concerned. Notes are sent home when a child's accomplishments are outstanding. Visits are made to the homes of some of the pupils. All these associations are in addition and supplementary to the regular formal report card. Continued in the A7, they aid in the understanding of the child's social adjustment or maladjustment.

Understanding Through New Emphasis

In the B8 the emphasis is twofold. Since the home-room teacher will have visited the home of every pupil in the group by this time, the first consideration is: Are there home conditions which materially aid or hinder the progress of the child? If the latter, can we do anything to help him? Does he need assistance, sympathy, or firmness? Needless to say, home conditions are not a matter for gossip; they are of interest only in so far as through knowledge of them the teachers can understand or aid the child.

The second emphasis grows out of the results of the achievement tests given to every B8 pupil in the school. They are standardized tests which show national norms of accomplishment in reading, arithmetic, language usage,

spelling, penmanship. The tests are given by the counselor and graded by the home-room teacher. The group median is found; careful comparison is made of the standing of individuals in this test and in those given in B7. From abilities shown, advice is given on the choice of electives open to the pupils in the A8. At this time, parent- and pupil-trust in the home-room teacher's interest and judgment prove invaluable.

In the A8 faculty meeting, reports from the elective teachers are given special study, or, if a considerable number of the students have chosen a single elective, that teacher is present. Those at the meeting consider the matter of whether the pupil has chosen wisely. Whatever the choices, recognition and status will be given in home-room, and praise will reward the boy who does well in woodshop, as well as the one who merits an "A" in Latin.

Guidance Toward Vocations

The ninth grade finds the members of the group scattered in various fields. No longer is it the compact group of the B7. Fewer teachers are present at the meetings, which are usually briefer with more reliance on written reports than on personal conference. The goals for the grade are educational stimulation and character guidance. The home-room teacher talks of right methods of study, of the value of a definite time and place for work. She makes use of college catalogues, of biographies of leaders in various fields, and relies on the knowledge she has gained of her pupils. Do they like their parents' vocations? How would they fit themselves for such work? Are they interested in pursuing their hobbies? Can such things

become a career? The child's ambition, if positive, is discussed with his teachers. Should he be encouraged, or is he attempting something for which he has shown no ability? The child is given the feeling of the teacher's interest. The sense that someone cares is highly important in inducing right conduct.

The very personal element, which makes the plan which has been outlined highly successful in the case of a teacher gifted with the power of inspiring confidence, may render it of only moderate value with the teacher who, reserved herself, does not readily draw out others. Again, it may be that though a situation is understood, it apparently cannot be bettered; unable to alter the child's environment or to change his habits, the knowledge seems a futile

thing. The war has handicapped the association with the home. Far more mothers are working; supervision is lessened; the parent finds it impossible to come to the school. The teachers, in days of gasoline shortage and car pools, are no longer able to go freely to the home.

Nevertheless, the school believes that under this plan it has learned more about its children than ever before and that the pupils show increased security and more enthusiasm for group participation. A great deal is known about every child by one teacher at least, usually by two, often by three. To none is he merely a name on the roll-book. Means of improving the plan are constantly sought, but work under it continues.



Britain's Schools at War

BY JANUARY, 1941, the President of the Board of Education was able to report to the House of Commons that of the 22.2 per cent of the normal child population of school age then living in London, 81 per cent were attending school. By July 31, 1941, he was able to say that more than 99 per cent of the child population of the country was attending school again. . . .

A tremendous and successful effort has been made by teachers to provide, as part of school work, activities which will make children feel that they are contributing to the war effort in ways that are recognized by adults. . . .

The schools have also become social centers. Most schools in industrial areas now open about 8 A.M. so that children whose parents have gone to work can

play or study before school begins. Many schools serve breakfast and tea as well as a hot mid-day meal. In December, 1942, 346 new play centers with places for 20,000 children had been set up to keep the children off the streets in the evenings, while 66 more were in preparation. School yards and sections of parks are used for organized games especially at week-ends. The schools have been kept open during vacations by skeleton staffs of teachers who have taken their own holidays in rotation. Voluntary helpers have made possible much of this activity and the teachers' efforts have won them a new place in the social life of the community.—*Juvenile Delinquency in Britain During the War*, British Information Services.

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