An alert teacher soon discovers that she has much to learn from those around her

Teachers of Teachers

DALE ZELLER

TEACHERS DO learn from each other, from the children they teach, and from the communities they serve. So do people in other professions and businesses learn from the people they work with and the communities they live in; and, if they have responsibility for children—as parents, Boy or Girl Scout directors, Sunday School teachers, or welfare workers—they learn from children, too. The significance of a teacher's learning lies in the fact that her service is social welfare service to the young, through an institution that has a direct responsibility to help the young grow up happily and effectively and at the same time to make the school a service institution to the community that pays her salary. She rarely works in isolation even in rural schools, for she cooperates with a supervisor or a county superintendent and belongs to teacher organizations. The average trained teacher (and in this article I am talking only about trained teachers) works in a building with other teachers and is a part of a county, village, or city system.

Granted that a teacher learns from children, the community, and other teachers, what does she learn? why are the things she learns from these sources important? and how can these kinds of learnings be enriched? How much she learns and the quality of her learning is determined in part by the kind of person she is, the kind of training she has had, her maturity and experience, and the kind of community and school system in which she works.

I

Learning from Children

One thing all teachers must learn in order to keep their jobs is to get on with the children they teach. That expression "get on" is variously interpreted in individual communities and school systems. To some it still means keeping children orderly and obedient and having them say back lessons assigned in textbooks. All such teachers are not of an equal badness, for there are several degrees of difference between the kindly, sympathetic, do-as-you're-told teacher who can make assigned lessons in a textbook interesting and the harsh, unsympathetic, cross individual who rules by fear and does not mind how children feel about their lessons so long as they get them.

Kindness Is Not Enough

But it is not enough to learn to get on with children benevolently by assigning child tasks and making unnecessary tasks interesting by clever devices. A little boy of 7 moved to a town whose teachers were of this benevolent, traditional type. He came from a system in which he had spent two years in living joyously with children of his own maturity under the guidance of
A headful of knowledge gleaned from college textbooks is only the beginning of a teacher's education. Once on the job, she finds new "teachers" on every hand—the boys and girls in her classes, her fellow-workers, and the people of the community in which she works. The importance of these frequently overlooked sources of education and how they may be used are discussed in this article by Dale Zeller, Professor of Education in Kansas State Teachers College.

Teachers who knew how to plan child living with children. He disliked his new school intensely. His mother said, "Isn't Miss W— kind?" He answered, "She's too kind. That's just it. She always wants you to be comfortable, but she doesn't let us do anything interesting." That teacher had learned to get on with children, that is, make children comfortable and orderly for adults to live with, but she failed entirely in that most essential thing of all—to learn from children what they need to learn under her guidance, how to help them make their choices, how to recognize and do their growing-up tasks.

In the final analysis, it is the children who must teach the teacher what to teach and how to teach. Courses in child development and guidance in observing children prepare her for learning from them, but from each group and from each child in that group she must learn what they need to know and when they need to know it.

Learning Through Understanding

Can this kind of learning from children be enriched, and, if so, how? First, it can be enriched by making the understanding of children—of how children grow, of their learning needs, and of how they express these needs—the basic part of pre-service training. A concern for child life in its relation to the culture and the times must come from the teacher's pre-service training. This would mean that at the present time the teacher must learn to see how problems developed by a global war affect her children. She must learn from a disturbed child his specific concern. Perhaps he has an Army father, a working mother, or is a member of a migrant family living in a crowded defense area.

Some teachers are receiving training for this type of understanding through in-service help in workshops, laboratories, and extension courses and from supervisors acting as resource persons. In a community and a school system where teaching through understanding is appreciated and rewarded, the value of learning from children is greatly enhanced.

II

Learning From Other Teachers

It is impossible to work with others and not learn something from them. Sometimes the learning is superficial; it may be detrimental; it can be deeply significant when its possibilities are recognized and its opportunities utilized. Learning a new method of teaching long division, a new reading readiness device, or—if one is a new teacher—learning the best places to buy what and where to go are examples of superficial learnings from associates.

But a teacher may also learn to conform to local practice and to abandon her pre-service glimpse of better ways of doing things. A dramatic incident is that of Ellen M., who, educated in March, 1944

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modern ways of child living, went into a traditional school system and gave up teaching children through experiences to teach them subject matter lessons page-by-page from textbooks. Being the only new teacher in the school, she had been won over to the more practiced ways of experienced teachers. She learned. But what did she learn? She learned to conform, to abandon her better ways of working. It is debatable whether it will ever be different when inexperience meets experience, unless positive steps are taken to foster improved practices.

A Newcomer Teaches New Ways

In contrast, an entire staff of a laboratory school learned to use the community and utilize the environment from Rose W., a new fifth grade teacher who had been added to the staff to make some desirable changes in a traditional school set-up. Rose W. understood children and how to utilize their interest in learning from first-hand experiences. The children of the other age groups came to her room to see the new canaries, the snake eggs, and the turtles, and begged to go along on field trips. Co-workers were critical, and they only began to learn when her way of teaching won approval and praise. Then the new teacher became a resource person who helped others solve their problems when they needed and sought her aid.

In any situation, then, the teacher who is sensitive to other persons learns when she is working with fellow-teachers. In some situations she has learned the yes-yes way of getting on with supervisors and colleagues; sometimes she has learned to reject the principle that it is the children for whom democratic schools have been set up and has accepted teaching as a way to make a living, managing the routine of school in the manner easiest and most comfortable for her. She may have learned to be self-protective, to accept the current way of doing things in order to get along. In other cases she has acquired a professional point of view, a feeling of the obligations schools have in a democracy, and a feeling of adventure and joy in working with a competent staff.

Under what conditions can learning from teachers yield the richest benefits? Whenever the school unit—whether it is a State, a city, village, or a county system—manages its affairs so there is over-all planning by the group to develop common aims and purposes, to discover common problems, and to make use of cooperative ways of meeting them, the teacher has the finest opportunity for her best learning from other teachers. In this concept of a school system and a unified program, teachers as well as principals and supervisors are resource people for other teachers.

Gardens for Numbers

Mrs. A—who knows how to help children grow gardens becomes a resource person to Miss B—who doesn't know gardens, but can help 4B children use numbers significantly in their everyday experiences. Mrs. A—is not free to go to Miss B—or Miss B—to seek Mrs. A—unless the school is so managed that teachers may turn to each other for help. The teacher must know where assistance is to be found, and opportunities for visiting, counsel work,
workshop experiences, and the like must be provided. The principle that teachers can and should learn from each other must be a guide in setting up an in-service program, for one of the most rewarding experiences an individual can have is that of working at common purposes and sharing experiences with associates.

III

LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNITY

It is easy to see how a teacher learns from the exceptional people in a community—music from Mrs. H—, generous living from Mrs. B—, and books from Mr. C—. But what happens in a situation where the teacher has had more advantages of so-called superior living than the people in the community? The literature of living is full of rich experiences of teachers who lived in an underprivileged community and learned from the people there, stories of missionaries, mountain people, life in the slums. But as one student said, “It’s easy to learn in a privileged community and to see things to be done in a community where living is substandard, but how can I help or learn in a community where things are running at a fairly even level?”

A Community Can Teach Those Who Will Learn

Community learning may be meager, rich, or harmful. The most extreme case I know of undesirable learning from a community is that of Mary S. who went from a privileged school in a university town to a slum district in a large city during the depression years of the thirties. In one semester Mary S. had learned to reject the undernourished, half-washed, uninspiring children, and their (to her) hopeless parents on relief. She drew her fur coat about her and returned to the more satisfying atmosphere of clean and well-behaved children and comfortable, cultured parents. Fortunately, there are other types of teachers.

Jesus is an outstanding example of a teacher who learned from the communities in which He taught. He knew the fishing communities and learned to use their language, for He said, “Come with me, and I will make you a fisher of men.” He knew their tax laws, their marriage customs, their festival days, and He taught them as He lived among them, but they first taught Him. If He had not known their ways of living, He could not have taught them.

Bringing the Community Into the School

Teachers, to be effective, must let their community teach them its needs, its aspirations, and how it solves its problems. They must also learn from the community the role it expects the school to play, for community expectancy exerts almost as much influence on a teacher as teacher expectancy exerts on children. Unfortunately, in some instances, the community may not have attacked its problems as a whole, and the school may exist apart from it, as something formal and remote.

The teacher must approach her work with a clear understanding of how to learn from a community. She must learn what the community is doing and what its resources are so that she and the school may make use of the opportunities offered to enrich the learning
of children. The idea of the school's service to the community must be dominant in her thinking. She must have the techniques for studying the community and for bringing the community into the school and the school into the community. She must not come to a community with a generalized picture of a satisfactory school, for she must know this community, know how her school and her community may be brought closer together.

The teacher learns most effectively when the community has developed cooperative ways of working and has given the school a major role to play in solving group problems. Such a community seeks teachers and public officials who have this concept of a school's place in a community. But even the best-trained teacher in the most forward-looking community has to learn from that community how she and the school can serve it best.

To summarize: The attitude of the teacher is a determining factor in how significant the opportunity to learn will be to her. She needs to recognize that her previous training only prepares her to benefit from new opportunities to learn. The understanding of what she must learn, her willingness to learn, and the techniques she brings for learning are all important factors in the process.

When once she is ready to learn and has the techniques for profiting highly from it, the attitudes and the arrangements for learning that she finds in the school system and the accepted roles of the community and school determine in large measure whether her learnings will be sparse or bountiful. The opportunities given her for attacks on common problems through workshops, laboratory experiences, term planning, etc., will be determining factors of the extent of her learning.

Whether her learnings are rich or meager will depend on the kind of pre-service and in-service training she has and the philosophy underlying them. Neither alone is enough.