

Experiment in Learning

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This is the story of an experiment. You may not wish to use the actual plan for pupil grouping adopted by the teachers of Dowagiac, Mich., but we believe you will agree that experimentation is a healthy thing and that only through the testing and evaluating of practices can real progress in education come about. Worthy of note is the fact that the Dowagiac plan incorporates two of the important phases of in-service growth for teachers stressed by authors in last month's *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*. One is the value of what goes on in the classroom as a source of teacher growth. The other is the need for giving teachers time for in-service projects in the regular school schedule. Describing the work in Dowagiac is Lulu M. Barton, elementary school principal.

REMARKS SUCH AS "If I had only known," "What shall I do with Johnny if he has the innate capacity to learn more than the required subject matter?" "What can be done with Sally if she is incapable of keeping pace with the group?" "How can I help Joe if socially he is inadequate but is outsize and just must be promoted?"—these are part of every teacher's conversational diet.

In Dowagiac, Mich., teachers have attempted to plan cooperatively a program of learning for just such youngsters. For several years the entire staff working with an executive committee has been responsible for all policy-making. Four years ago the Board of Education agreed to an experimental four-day, post-school workshop to appraise practices in the local schools. The children were dismissed one week early while the teachers worked leisurely in committees, evaluating all phases of the school program. Then, because the results were so worthwhile, a pre-school period was planned for Labor Day week to continue the appraisal started in the spring. Much to the teachers' joy, the Board of Education, because of the workshop's far-reaching results, accepted these two periods as annual events.

One of the ideas "cropping out" of a work period or "teacher parley" is a method of grouping which enables teachers to meet more adequately the needs of each Dowagiac youngster. There was a time when the chief purpose of the school was the teaching of reading, writing, and arithmetic as ends in

themselves. Today, it is felt that the kinds of experiences which children receive in their out-of-school life need to be included in the list of responsibilities placed upon the school. Present trends in curriculum-making place upon the teacher a heavy responsibility in discovering the needs of the pupils, in choosing the best kind of experiences and materials for each boy and girl, and in assisting them in sensing relationships that exist in the work one does over long and short periods of time.

Reading Becomes the Guinea Pig

Our testing program invariably revealed a wide range of reading abilities within each grade. Obviously, not all the children were up to grade requirements, and on the other hand many were marking time and needed to move ahead. Reading, then, seemed to be the natural place to initiate a new plan. It would be an attempt to place each child in the best learning situation for him as an individual.

The plan provides for a continuing program in relation to the best experiences for achievement and development of each individual child. Dowagiac teachers are convinced that there can be no beginning and positively no end to reading instruction on any one level; that no teacher should be allowed to believe that any part of the task can be completed on any one level for all children. In accordance with such a philosophy, the reading activities are considered without regard for grade division.

As the result of such planning, it is hoped that no child will ever be introduced to a type of reading experience which demands aptitudes, concepts, and attitudes which he does not at that time possess. No child will be urged to go more rapidly than is warranted by his ability, interest, and stage of physical control. A feeling of security developing from success and satisfaction, even when the actual achievement is meager, shall be assured, if possible, in all reading experiences in order that a favorable attitude toward reading and a zest for learning to read may be attained. It should follow that children who have achieved satisfactorily the desired results are prepared to make rapid growth in all phases of reading through an enriched program which will include many types of literary experience.

How Grouping Works

Grouping was first tried in the fifth and sixth grades and during last year was practiced in grades one and two. To illustrate, each of the two second grades in one building is divided into three reading groups. One section is composed of children equal to a stepped-up reading program. Another is made up of average children who are given work peculiar to their needs. The third group of children receives special help in reading instruction and reads material of a simple level of difficulty but yet of high interest value.

All the children remain in their homerooms during the major part of the day for the general planning period and the activity and discussion period. The regrouping plan is in effect during a period in the morning and afternoon. The children of average and superior reading ability are combined under the direction of one second-grade teacher, while the other teacher concentrates on developmental as well as corrective or remedial phases of the reading program. Groupings are tentative and shifts made whenever the child's progress seems to justify reassignment.

During the first few days or weeks, each teacher takes time to get acquainted with the children, to discover handicaps, and abilities, and to make special note of needs generally as they are brought to light. It is the teacher's responsibility, in planning the reading program for any group, to determine or interpret all test results; to obtain as intimate

a knowledge of each child as possible through personal and parent interview; to consider all available information and advice from the nurse, previous teachers, and principal in the school; and to bring to bear his knowledge of children and how they learn to read. Every aspect of the child's school experiences is considered as it meets the needs of his unique personality. The total school program is organized with a great deal of flexibility in order that it may serve the needs, interest and capacity of each child.

In general the day's schedule makes provision for at least the following: (1) a general planning period, (2) a general activity and discussion period, (3) a period for physical activities involving rhythms, music, and play, and (4) the practice period for work in skills.

By using a daily schedule composed of large time blocks the teacher is able to do more effective direct teaching. She has more time to devote to the individual pupil during the time set aside for specific practice than she would have where schedules consist of many short and independent periods.

The further division of children for specific practice enables the teacher to know individual pupils and to regroup them within the special group so as to guide them more adequately. The conference and evaluation period, a definite part of the special practice period, offers an unusual opportunity for instructional guidance. In such a situation both teacher and pupil are placed in a relationship that is conducive to good learning. The division of labor between teachers makes for concentrated planning and better teacher preparation. It is now possible to do a better job of differentiating and individualizing the work for all children. Each teacher is keen to devise rich and varied lessons with all the visual aids and materials available.

Proceeding on Solid Ground

An effective program cannot be planned unless favorable relationships exist between school and home. There needs to be a sincere and sympathetic understanding between the parent and teacher. It is the policy in Dowagiac, whenever possible, to establish a direct relationship. Personal conferences are planned with the parents of each child during the school year. It has been observed that if such conferences deal with favorable re-

actions and a stronger bond of understanding is woven between parent and teacher, more difficult matters can be attacked in subsequent conferences. Such personal interviews have often solved minor difficulties before they reach major importance. Interpretation of school activities and policy can be dealt with more effectively through personal contacts with the home.

The parents are also sent informal letters, discussing the achievement, problems, abilities, and contributions of the child. Such letters suggest ways and means of improvement rather than pointing only to weaknesses. In addition, they request assistance from the parents in meeting the more significant problems of child adjustment.

Last year several conferences were held with parents representing all three schools in

the city to discuss instructional policies. Parents' comments were to be considered in the revamping of the Handbook (a bulletin compiled by teachers and revised yearly). A few times parents of children who needed closer home and school ties were invited to confer with teachers and determine with them the next move. The results were so gratifying that it is planned to have more such get-togethers with a frank and free discussion of current educational practices and local school policies, along with the clinic approach which has been so revealing and helpful.

As the new year begins, there are still many chances for children literally to wade aimlessly, and for subject matter—in some cases exceedingly pointless—to be doled out. But at least a beginning toward more meaningful learning has been made.

Building America Begins Eleventh Year

Building America, the pictorial study-unit series sponsored by the Department of Supervision and Curriculum Development, is ten years old this fall. Since its first appearance in 1935—at which time it was sponsored by the Society for Curriculum Study—*Building America* has grown rapidly as an important teaching tool. The Department recognizes as a major factor in this growth the excellent work of Frances M. Foster as editor of the publication and Paul R. Hanna as chairman of the editorial board. At the end of the 1944-45 fiscal year, *Building America* paid to the Department \$2,500.

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