

Tools for Learning

UNDERSTANDING OUR TIMES

PAULINE P. SCHWARTZ

Understanding our times presents two basic ideas—*Understanding! Our Times!* Reaching with restless fingers beyond these two ideas is one related to constructive and effective use of this understanding in personal and group living, in social, political, and economic activities.

Understandings come to us through all of our senses. Experiences of feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, and hearing all contribute to our state of understanding. Few phases of modern life can be well-rounded and full of meaning, can be accurately interpreted, without a variety of stimuli which influence several senses. This means that the schools need to utilize materials and situations which use the various sensory gateways to learning and which can be made to facilitate the interpretation of precepts or sensations. This means that the written and spoken word should be made increasingly meaningful through many and varied activities.

The effective educator finds or sets up situations in which the child gets such experiences. Then he makes it his business to help the child translate these experiences into accurate ideas and constructive action. The educator locates or organizes situations in which children, at appropriate maturity levels, have meaningful interpretable contacts with life nearby and far afield. He uses trips to local institutions. He shows still and moving pictures representing normal (not dress parade or merely spectacular) conditions. He has his pupils work with graphs, maps, globes, models, and charts portraying accurately and vividly various phases of the contemporary scene.

He has them become, through first-hand or vicarious experiences, familiar with people similar to and quite different from them-

selves in religion, race, nationality, economic condition, and general experiential background. Mingling through work and play with such individuals brings understanding as little else can do. He stimulates work on practical school and community problems adapted to group and individual maturity levels. He encourages his children to work with their peers and others on real jobs, getting practical suggestions for meeting the challenge of these jobs from the printed page, from community folk, and from their own creative imagination.

These practical experiences involve work that really needs to be done in order to make school, home, and community life more satisfying in the long and short term sense. There is no need to invent jobs. Life situations provide plenty of them as the following examples indicate. The schoolroom needs to be so arranged that there is place for everyone to work comfortably on the playthings and clothing which the children are preparing for the people of devastated Holland. The luncheon schedule and procedure need to be adjusted to more successfully fit the convenience of the whole school. The community needs a "city beautiful" movement involving the removal of unsightly and dangerous rubbish heaps, the development of garden and grass plots, and the planting of trees. The farming area needs a soil conservation program. These and hundreds of other life activities put children to work with their peers, their adult neighbors, their community officials and other leaders, and with people farther afield on jobs that require and, in turn, develop understanding of our current way of life.

Ours is an age of personal, national, and international interdependence. It is an age of

A teacher has no greater task than helping children to understand our times. Ways of accomplishing this important job are discussed in this month's "Tools for Learning" by Pauline P. Schwartz, professor of social sciences, State Teachers College, New Haven, Conn.

rapid but broken-front change. Ours is an age of unrest brought on, to a large extent, by the strains and stresses set up by the broken-front nature of this change and the personal involvements attendant upon interdependence. In America, family and community life, educational and religious institutions, and production and distribution programs have not adjusted equally or similarly to our change from agrarian to industrial economy. Social and economic phases of life have changed at different speeds and, too often in different directions. In the majority of the other parts of the world similar maladjustments exist. To add to the tensions, nations have become greatly dependent upon each other for economic security and that, unattended by mutual understanding and respect, has set up fear of physical reprisal.

Children must come to understand this complex, changing, imbalance we call modern society. And schools must find or make a way of developing this understanding. They must come off their isolated hill and help the community to want and to foster a well-rounded practical, academic, and value-building type of "schooling" which will make the community's children understanders of our times and doers in fields of endeavor which are the antithesis of the Hitlerian and the destructive-use-of-atomic-energy way of life.

This can be done only by teachers who have vision, skill, and understanding; teachers whose personality and activities stimulate interest and confidence in children and community folk; teachers who find and wisely

use a great variety of appropriate activities and materials of instruction within and without the school walls.

The teacher must have more than cold-storage knowledge about our modern age. He must have a well-grounded and functional understanding, a vital and active interest in life as it is lived, in conditions as they exist. He must be constantly alert to local, national, and international situations. He must read liberal and conservative books, periodicals, and pamphlets. He must listen to public lectures and radio programs. He must move about his own community and in places farther afield analyzing what he sees and hears. He must rub elbows with people of various backgrounds and interests. In other words, he must know, understand, and be that alert citizen-scholar-teacher demanded by our time.

Then, while knowing much and continuing to grow in understanding, he must find and utilize school materials which present social, economic, and political phases of life accurately, vividly, dynamically, and on appropriate child-maturity levels. He must make available materials which educate all of the senses and supplement the community materials and experiences. He must select with care and use with skill, understanding, and insight those audio-visual materials, those books and periodicals, those symbolic representations of social, economic, and political facts and conditions which are so essential to the development of functional understanding of our changing, tensioned, interdependent civilization.

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