

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

MANY SCHOOLS are taking inventory, not only of enlarged opportunities for learning in the community but within the school walls themselves. Too often, in the past, children have been placed in a "lush environment for learning" with no effort made on the part of teachers and administrators to actually use this "lush environment" and its countless opportunities for developing skill and responsibility in social living. Some evidence of actual practice in this, however, follows immediately in accounts of responsibilities assumed by children in the elementary, junior, and senior high school as well as by administrators and state departments of education.

In Business for Themselves

MARY A. ADAMS

Children who are encouraged in "running the business of the school" have a head start on those whose energies and enthusiasms are dampened by too much and sometimes unnecessary help from adults. This is illustrated by Mary A. Adams, assistant superintendent, Elementary Education, Baltimore, Md.

ONE OF THE happiest developments in education is found in that community of purpose, of interest, and of experience which characterizes life in many present-day elementary schools. Gone, in many communities, is the school that was composed of a number of separate and unrelated classrooms, each containing its quota of pupils who "belonged" to the particular teacher assigned to that room and whose entire school life was bound up in what happened therein. Gone, too, in most instances, is the belief that the running of the school is strictly the business of the principal and that the direction of the classroom is solely the function of the individual teacher. Instead, today, in school after school, we find six-year-olds planning together not only with their teacher and their classmates concerning the ordering of life in the first grade, but also exchanging ideas and accepting responsibilities together with seven- and nine- and eleven-year olds for the management of schoolwide

activities and enterprises. We see boys and girls living industriously, eagerly, and contentedly in an environment that includes their own pupil council and school orchestra, Junior Red Cross activities and school bank, glee club, clean-up committee, assembly programs, and safety patrol. Truly, elementary children are in business for themselves, the business of making their school home attractive and satisfying as a place in which to live richly and pleasantly.

Such pupil activities are not the result of a lax or sentimental attitude on the part of the school faculty. These opportunities for having children manage the business of their own living stem from the conviction that growth in the skills of living well with others constitutes a significant and essential aspect of a well-balanced educational program, and that the best way of learning to deal effectively with others in the intricate job of human relationships is to have firsthand experience.

Teachers who believe that these experiences are educationally valuable look at the business of living through the eyes of their eight- or five- or twelve-year-old pupils and see it for the complex and difficult task that it is. They recognize the problems presented to these youngsters, each a totally different individual who must learn how to establish himself with his peers in the various groups that are continually forming, shifting, and reforming within the life of the class and school. Such teachers appreciate the fact that as these different young personalities interact, social growth occurs. The children develop skills in playing and working with others and become sensitive to their purposes and feelings. They gain vivid and meaningful experiences from their associates who vary in interest, age, capacity, and culture. Friendships emerge from the shared enterprises, and feelings of belongingness and of security arise as children show increasing competence in maintaining successful relationships with their schoolmates.

Understanding Is Enlarged

Discerning teachers also look upon these social interactions of children as a means of enlarging their own understanding of them. They know that they become better teachers as they become more thoughtful students of their pupils. There is, then, a double benefit in having children manage the business of their own lives; the gain in the personal and social development of the children; and the increase in the professional insight of their teachers who learn to know them better and consequently to work with them more understandingly.

Those who believe in the educative

values of pupil activity and responsibility are professional leaders who believe also in the functions of the school as a force for education in the democratic way of life. They realize that children who are the responsible agents for the conduct of their own affairs learn at firsthand the necessity of cooperation to effective action. Through such experiences they discover for themselves what happens when responsibilities are carried carelessly or conscientiously, when members of the group work with friction or with smoothness. They encounter the difficulties of solving a problem single-handed and come to appreciate that the ideas of many are better than those of one. They attach new values to schoolmates who can keep accurate accounts, or contribute to the musical part of a program, or write an appealing announcement of a forthcoming school event, or produce an effective poster, or oversee a group of children. They learn to think to a point, to try out solutions, and to evaluate results. Teachers identify these learnings in terms of group thinking, cooperative action, leadership and membership responsibilities, appreciation of the unique characteristics of the individual, and the like. Children exemplify their growth through better group relations, fewer evidences of conflict, more responsible attitudes, more reasonable action, and greater willingness to work until a self-imposed obligation is fulfilled.

If pupils are to gain in this manner from the management of their own school living it is important that their responsibilities be genuine, not perfunctory, and their enterprises child-desired, not adult-imposed. This re-

quirement offers teachers a real challenge in steering a wise course in pupil guidance, avoiding the danger of aimless and ineffectual child activity on the one hand and of teacher domination on the other. In the charting of this course principles of group planning are of aid. The following illustration may serve to point out some of these essential characteristics of cooperative activity and of pupil-teacher relationships.

Too Many Bumps and Bruises

In one school, the faculty sponsor of the Pupil Council commented, in an apparently casual way, on the number of skinned knees and minor injuries that had to be given first aid in the health suite at the close of the noon lunch recess. The Council representatives had not realized this problem, but the teacher's remark touched off their interested concern, and an investigating committee was appointed to watch children on the playground and to discover what caused the many small injuries. These alert youngsters noticed that there was a good bit of aimless running which led to accidents caused by stumbling and colliding with others. They found some children standing around, doing nothing, and apparently without interest.

This diagnosis of the situation by the investigating committee was received by the Council with interested discussion. As a result, the members recommended to the faculty the purchase of a quantity of inexpensive play equipment: bean bags, soft balls, rubber heels, jumping ropes, balls and jacks, and the like. While these supplies were being secured, the Council appointed a com-

mittee to suggest procedures for their use during lunch recess. They thought that children should choose their own playmates, rather than organize teams, "because you like to be with your friends and maybe you don't want to play a real game." These suggestions were discussed with each class in the school by a committee representative and the resulting arrangements about procedures with play equipment were cleared through the council. The children recognized the problem of caring for the equipment when the representative from the Opportunity Class, whose pupils had made the bean bags for the school, offered to sew them up if rips occurred. A committee on playground supplies was organized and it developed methods for issuing the equipment to individuals and checking to see that it was returned in good condition. Consultation with the principal resulted in the provision of a cupboard adequate for the housing of the equipment and its location accessible to the playground.

One other significant activity occurred after the introduction of the plan. Members of the original investigating committee checked on the number of minor accidents occurring at noon-time, finding a noticeable reduction, and maintained a spot-checking plan of supervision of the playground to note problems arising, of which there were a number. The program went through stages of study, review, and modification for several months in the council meetings and subsequent class discussion. Thereafter, it became an established part of school life, reduced to an habitual level and demanding little attention except from those pupil leaders

charged by their fellows with its administration.

Growth Stages Scrutinized

In this example may be seen progressively the stages of pupil growth through which this enterprise developed. First, there was *the initial aspect of the pupils' discovery of a problem genuine to them because of its reality and importance to their own interests*. The teacher's part in this discovery was not as casual as her remark might have indicated. Actually it illustrates her preplanning in terms of the pupils' needs and her skill in introducing the problem simply and unobtrusively.

Next, there was *provision for successive stages of pupil planning on the basis of experience*. None of the planning took place in the abstract. All of it arose gradually as the results of each step in working out the program led naturally to the next. Again the place of adults may be sensed as this plan evolved. Note the pupils' recommendations to the faculty regarding the need for equipment and its subsequent provision, their discussions in the classrooms—obviously with faculty understanding and support—their conference with the principal, and the resultant supply of a storage cupboard in a convenient location. The easy interchange of recommendations and suggestions between pupils and teachers is readily seen; yet the children's consciousness of responsibility was not disturbed.

A third characteristic of cooperative planning is evident, also, *in the existence of full and free interaction between members of the pupil group, with real responsibilities attached*. The use of

committees and their reporting to the larger Pupil Council and to the individual classrooms afforded opportunities for having this project understood by all because it was the business of all. The pupils found, too, that their ideas counted because the program was modified as a result. The children in charge of handling the equipment realized that upon the successful discharge of their duties depended the availability of equipment in good condition. The program could not operate without them. These interactions all indicate teacher guidance. Those committee members who reported to classes and council worked out the presentations as English problems in the classroom. The Opportunity Class made the bean bags for the school because their teacher habitually used such leads for having these mentally handicapped children make material contributions to school life which increased their value in the eyes of others and helped them to feel a sense of belonging.

A fourth aspect of worthwhile cooperative action is found in *the inclusion of activities of evaluation and further improvement*. The investigating committee did not complete its job with the beginning of the enterprise. Its members developed feelings of concern for the welfare of others and of responsibility for the program they had initiated. Consequently, they felt called upon to study results as well as causes and to continue their investigation of results demonstrated and of problems still occurring. The teachers' share in this evaluation is not too obvious, but, as in the beginning, the council's sponsor supplied deft and unobtrusive guidance and the classroom teachers supported the pupil leaders'

later modifications of the total program.

This illustration of a comprehensive activity is given in detail because it emphasizes two considerations in having children intelligently and successfully take care of the business of their own living; the importance of certain characteristics of group planning and action, and the significance of thoughtful teacher guidance. Both elements are necessary if children are to feel happy and secure in such a program and if the educational values are to be insured.

Activities of Many Kinds

It must not be inferred that every evidence of pupil-planning and self-management is necessarily so extended, nor that all such undertakings emanate from a schoolwide setting. While there are numerous long-term activities of this sort, many valuable activities have small beginnings and are of short duration. Indeed, the growth principle must be stressed especially in this connection and teachers should strive never to have children engage in programs of self-direction of great scope unless they have had many experiences of a less complex nature. Sound questions for the teacher to ask herself are:

“What am I doing for the children which they could plan and carry on for themselves?”

“What experiences have they had which will enable them to deal with this undertaking?”

“What additional experiences can be provided which will lead them toward success in the enterprise?”

Opportunities for group responsibility abound and illustrations may be cited in

number. Some of them arise within a single classroom and are extended to the entire school, as happened with a class engaged in Junior Red Cross activities, whose zest in this work led to the cooperative planning of an excellent project on a schoolwide basis; and with the sixth-grade group in another school, whose planning for their own absent members through postcard messages, visits, and other types of personal interest grew into their sponsoring of an attendance program for children in all classes. An interest in radio in still another class resulted in a survey of radio listening habits and program preferences, planned and conducted by the pupils themselves. The results of this activity were enlightening to parents and teachers as well as to the pupils themselves as they reached into consideration of what constituted desirable radio offerings for various age groups, the relation of radio listening to proper sleep and rest habits, and ultimately into the preparation of a radio program of their own.

Teachers who despair at the mounting array of unclaimed possessions in any elementary school will recognize the special value of the lost-and-found bureau operated in one situation. The pupil committee put into effect a plan whereby articles found were advertised throughout the school and “regular office hours” were observed daily during which children might secure their belongings. It has been gratifying to notice the reduction in the number of unclaimed articles because of the zeal of these pupil leaders.

The wealth of these opportunities for pupil responsibility and intelligent self-direction is such that it ranges from the

development of desirable routines in school living to the initiation and exploration of creative adventures in living and working with others. As teachers guide their young associates to experience the satisfactions of organizing and directing their own lives, they discover that pupil-teacher relationships of the highest order emerge. Children grow in self-confidence as they face

problems in their daily living with increasing competence. Better still, these young personalities find themselves living enthusiastically, eagerly, and effectively with their peers in situations that make school life rewarding and happy. Surely we need no greater or better reasons for operating our schools as real laboratories for learning the important skills of human living.

COME TO CHICAGO!

What? Annual Meeting of ASCD

Where? Sherman Hotel, Chicago, Illinois

When? March 23-26, 1947

SOME HIGHLIGHTS of the annual meeting of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development will be the Sunday evening opening general session with Rabbi Charles E. Shulman, Glencoe, Illinois as the speaker; the Sunday afternoon informal coffee hour; and a series of discussion groups dealing with three curriculum problems—IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM CHANGE IN OUR MODERN TECHNOLOGICAL WORLD; CURRICULUM BUILT ON HUMAN GROWTH; and HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN THE SUPERVISORY PROCESS. Other activities you won't want to miss include the Tuesday afternoon discussion groups on specific areas of curriculum building; open committee meetings in which everyone shares in the business of the Association; and the general sessions on Monday and Tuesday evenings which will deal with the topics of lay-professional cooperation for school needs and the role of the college and the university in curriculum experimentation.

Three other professional groups in which our members will be interested, are holding meetings at the Sherman on Saturday, March 22. These groups are: *The Association of Student Teaching*, *The National Council on Elementary Science*, and the *State Directors of Elementary Education*.

The luncheon on Wednesday, March 26, which will also be the closing session, will be devoted to a discussion of our international responsibilities as educators by individuals who have had firsthand experience and who can materially enlarge our vision in this crucial area.

More detailed information was provided to the membership in the January *News Exchange*. The printed program of the meeting will be mailed to all members late in February. Those who are not members, but who are interested in receiving a copy of the *News Exchange* or the printed program may do so by sending 15 cents to this office to cover handling and mailing costs.

REMINDER: Please be *sure* to bring your program to Chicago with you!

Copyright © 1947 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.