

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR TECHNIQUES?

Analysis of group structure is a means toward achieving better opportunities for overall growth and development of children and youth in our schools. The articles which follow point out to educators various ways in which the group situation may provide better avenues to learning.

A Class—or a Group?

INGA OLLA HELSETH

The kinds of experiences which promote group unity rather than mere mechanical organization should be provided in education today. Inga Olla Helseth, on leave of absence from the College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Va., calls attention to the importance of interplay and group development through emphasizing contributions which any person can make to the good of the whole.

ONE OF THE serious problems facing modern teachers and supervisors is how to make possible those group experiences which are more than mass regimentation of individual experiences. Education for personal development implies experiences in both varied group and individual activities.

In too many classes in today's schools, relationships are mechanical rather than alive and developing from impulses in the organism which together the members constitute. The differences in mechanical and living relationships may readily be seen in comparing two trees. I attempt to construct a tree to use in a dramatic performance in my yard. I get together suitable materials. I saw; I hammer; I glue; I paint. If I am skillful enough, I produce a satisfactory effect for the occasion. At another time, I propose to grow a tree in my yard. I start with a seed. I plant; I irrigate; I allow time; I fertilize; I hoe; I prune; I spray. The tree that results from these activities grows according to the nature within. It has a long career of varied usefulness; other activities evolve. As different as are the two trees, so dif-

ferent are a class for recitation and a group for living. As different as were the processes in securing the two trees, so different are the processes by which one teacher arranges a formal school subdivision and the other teacher develops a unit of democracy.

Consider in a different media, the contrast of the mechanical and the living in relationships. Observe a loaded bus moving along a road. Within is a collection of persons. All are alike in that each desires transportation and each has a designated stopping point. All are paying fares. All are receiving similar services. All are acting on a common code of behavior toward each other, the driver, and the company's property.

Suppose that this bus has a breakdown far from any modern device for communication. Conceive also, that a child aboard the bus is suddenly found to be ill. Groups begin forming among the persons occupying the bus. There are those who cluster around the driver considering with him the machinery of the bus. Others gather about the child. A shelter may be constructed around a fire. Passengers produce a wrap, a

pillow, a hot water bottle, a tin for heating liquids, crackers, milk, aspirin, rubbing fluid, and a picture book. No two people contribute alike; no one demands anything of anyone but each uses his understanding to produce, for evaluation by trial, that fact, article, or service from among his resources which he considers fitting.

Much is gained by many individuals. No two, however, get the same services, the same training, the same knowledge, or the same uplift. If the experience continues when all possible has been done for physical comfort, other types of activities follow. Introductions take place—entertainment is sought—the building of good cheer goes on apace. Variety develops in leadership—the strong comfort the weak—the keen get together over plans—the “gifted” add beauty. Thus a group with natural subgroups comes to functioning in what was a sterile atmosphere of holding oneself in quiescence. If the experience continues over some length of time, it is probable that friendships and business dealings for the future may develop.

What's Wrong Here?

Sometimes, even able school leaders do not see the difference between a class and a group. A supervisor was invited to spend a day in a teacher's classroom. “This teacher wants help that we have not been able to give,” said the local supervisor. “Yes,” said the principal, “although she is one of my best teachers; she says she is making no progress.” The visiting supervisor sat through one lovely class period after another. The children took part in a variety of activities. Materials had been

carefully gathered. The teacher had planned every moment to be smooth and successful. Material results were tastefully displayed. Children were busy and vied with one another for the attention of the teacher. She was evidently close to every child there and her comradeship precious to him. Everything viewed seemed good to the visitor.

What could be wrong? The key to the difficulty lay in what was absent. The teacher did not gather her class for the making of large plans together. Proposals were not made by any child for the class; what each suggested was for himself although it was thought “nice” to let the other fellow have some of the same thing. No spontaneous get-togethers were seen all day. No committees came to action by simply seeing a job in common and attacking it. No child sought another's counsel, though there was curiosity about the doings of others. Progress was not displayed to a chum but always to the adored teacher in as much solitude as the child could achieve. The teacher dealt fondly with individuals, or “fairly” in turn when she brought the members together. Surely, the teacher was rightly unhappy. The situation did not promise desired growth in personality for her or for the children. The teacher had accepted a dead, conventionalized form. Her polishing and her adding of loving kindness could not bring life.

Getting Group Experiences Going

Youngsters, like adults, acquire habits of sitting back bored while affairs are handled according to an institutionalized pattern by a few officials. Such quiescence is as sad in education as in politics.

"I'd like to see him naughty," says the bothered teacher. For growth, mischief indeed is much to be preferred to passivity. Luckily, few persons become completely hardened in childhood; the skillful teacher can generally get responsibility linked with purposeful activity in some area.

Frequently, to secure action, individual pupils need only to be made conscious of the nature of the problem and thrown on their own responsibility. Such was the case with two ninth-graders. It was the close of their first study period under the new teacher. She invited the two boys to a conference. "Oh pshaw, Miss T.," they chorused, "we know we shouldn't behave so. Move our seats apart and we'll do OK." "Why, I got the impression," said Miss T. with amazement, "that you two liked each other!" "So we do," they exclaimed. "Then why should I separate you?" she challenged. "Boy, she's something like!" was the comment of the one as he left the room after the conference. Was it not sad that after eight years in school, the idea that chums could purpose and plan for happy classroom cooperation came as a new idea to those two fifteen-year-olds?

Informal acceptance by a teacher of the fact that youngsters will use good sense in a practical situation brings initiative into play, whether the matter needing attention is such as is usually classified under discipline or under scholarship. "Girls, you may gather in the southwest corner and plan a dramatic presentation to be made later in the day to the class. The problem is 'What were the difficulties that led to our break with England?' Can you get

the conditions which existed at that time clearly before us? You'll find the basic data in the next section of our history textbook." Such was the greeting of Mrs. G., as she faced her class assembling after recess.

"Boys," she continued, "come into this corner. I'd like to talk a matter of business with you. There is much that you will want to undertake this year to make opportunities better for your games at recess. This I've seen even in the one week I've been here. You can probably tell me much that needs to be done." Heads were nodding and hands waving for attention. "To some matters," Mrs. G. went on, "we ourselves can attend as quickly as we like. For example, let's take one item today. What's wrong with William's chance to have a good time? Did you observe what happened Monday? Yesterday? And again today? How can the game go on more efficiently?"

Suggestions came thick and fast. "William is not playing his best."—"Why?"—"There is always a disagreement."—"Why?"—"What have you to say, William?"—"Who can help us to see how it is that one thing leads to another in these petty squabbles?"—In the free give-and-take that imbedded these questions, many difficulties were brought to light. It was evident that the group was "ganged up" on William. He always got "sore." Sometimes he was "mad" and then he was "funny." He "brought it on himself." "OK," said Mrs. G., "you seem to be able to gather the facts. How about planning a way for handling your situation? William, you have a particularly large stake in handling today's problem well. John, will you take my place here as chair-

man?" Mrs. G. turned to the blackboard and began to write while she completed her remark. "I'll have plans for your reading here on the board by the time you solve this playground problem." Mrs. G. became consultant to the two groups, offering suggestions to individuals who approached her, meeting briefly with committees that formed for particular jobs, and entering into the discussions of the two large groups whenever she was invited or whenever she saw a bit of a crisis coming too soon or too heavily for these pupils who were inexperienced in maintaining good group relationships.

Everyone Has Something to Give

The most quickly developed group relationships, and those involving least danger to the teacher as fields for experimentation, are the relationships which arise when a roomful of children consciously undertake a suitable social purpose for work in common over a relatively long period ahead.

Even in the very formal class, genuine group relationships appear if the class, for example, gets enthusiastic about making an artistic public presentation of some idea to which the members jointly and emotionally adhere. Such a purpose may lead to plans for some dramatic or musical performance. Or a group may form readily if a class decides to construct something of intrinsic value—to make, for example, an attractive classroom setting, or a new playground, or a garden to supply vegetables for their hot lunches, or a book for recording unpublished local history. Sometimes the nucleus around which the group forms is the wish to provide for continuity in a pleasure briefly experienced

such as listening to the radio, organizing a cooperative library, running a loan bank, or developing a school publication.

Within such a purposeful undertaking by the total group, all kinds of working subgroups arise. When the individuals turn to search for data materials and tools, each becomes suddenly a committee of one on his own but working for the group, too. Adherences develop rapidly; three may wish to use the same reference volume; one may seek the help of a child he knows to be more able, but generous; or a recognized leader may marshal his forces to get a particular task done. Across and parallel to such natural groupings, the class may deliberately form committees for action. This may be because some materials are known to be scarce or some can be used only by pupils who have developed certain skills in research or expression. Sometimes the class can foresee, with the teacher's questioning, many differing tasks to do in order to bring the whole to that state of performance which gives social satisfactions. Frequently, the teacher must organize those individuals who cannot launch themselves when the class breaks into spontaneous groupings. Subgroups may continue active for long or short periods, some dissolving as soon as specifically set tasks have been completed, others finding themselves engaged on jobs which the class desires to go on indefinitely. In any live situation, where the teacher has skillfully and openly released pupil initiative, the subgroups will probably crisscross each other in ways utterly bewildering to any one person trying to direct them all, but simple to those who are active,

self-directive participants within a purpose and general plan seen in common by the group members, but developed differently by the varied personalities making up the class.

There will also be tasks common to all within any large class project—those routine duties to which each must respond in a set way so that the whole will move forward. There are those activities in search of a background of facts and understandings so that the pupil may participate satisfactorily in shaping action by the group—all may read a certain section of a text as a point of departure. There are ways of doing to which all must give allegiance if instruments are to be shared—a typewriter used in turn while the class reads silently, perhaps.

There will also be individual tasks developing because of particular gifts and interests in the children themselves. One child can best paint expressions into the faces in the scenery being contrived for the stage; another is better at designing the costumes; one makes rhymes readily, but must take as a base the thoughts of another child; some youngster who is known for his economic sense will be designated by the group to watch the bills. In most groups, there are some boys and girls who know library research materials and others who go ahead by contacting community organizations or interviewing adults to whom they habitually go for expert advice.

The teacher should create certain conditions that are essential to getting good natural interplay of thoughts and feelings with the whole group, subgroups, and individuals interacting. Children must be led to see, feel, and

express; otherwise, actions will be showy, shallow, and insincere. The teacher must see that the youngsters understand the total situation in which they are acting. This, for example, implies considering requirements of law, institutional framework, and community customs, as well as the skills and materials available. Responsibility must be concretely and definitely linked with freedom to make decisions and to act; this means allowing time for children to think instead of the customary listening to moralizing by the adult. The group should be led to influence its members, and to cause them habitually to be individually active in shaping group decisions. The teacher makes available expert advice on procedures and data from self or others.

The Individual Search for Mastery

Aside from the varied activities in promoting together a common project, there soon arises in a classroom where large purposeful projects are underway, a related, but very different series of activities, more consciously self-centered and more needful of professionally trained guidance. These are the doings of each individual as he becomes desirous of being an efficient person in some area of skill or a master of some field of understanding. This means individual programs pursued with vigor. Thus, facility in experimentation and research, power in using words, efficiency in manipulating facts about amounts, tendencies to illustrate, expertness in spelling and grammatical form may appear important and be developed by the individual child. Certainly, as the consciousness of the meaning of skill and scholarship develop, new fellow-

ship with comrades appears. Organizing and maintaining practice for increasing efficiency has its own need in relationships with others; indeed, opportunities to compare products and processes become personally precious where one is seeking analyzed degrees of success in some particular line.

The teacher who is aware of the many possibilities for success or failure now brings to bear her professional knowledge of how skills are developed and what is involved in any desired power. She procures and organizes the analytical step-by-step practice materials that professional investigators have produced. She shows the youngster how to face his job, how to use practice materials, how to use his time to advantage, how to subdivide his tasks, how to measure results, and how to get expert help when needed. But having put the youngster in charge of his own deliberate search for mastery, she does not forget him. She definitely does not direct him; but because of her watchful care new stimulating materials appear at the exact time needed, connection with another pupil having the exact difficulty or success is frequent, and calls come in about small conference groups offering particular types of guidance. Frequently, too, the whole class finds itself involved in some process needing the skills being mastered by individuals, and experiences in connection with institutions or adults open up vistas of further skills that are useful in the world of the grownups.

Freeing Creative Effort

A third type of endeavor crowns the more commonplace activities in the good modern classroom, namely, crea-

tive experiences. The teacher, however, can herself contribute toward proper conditions for creative experiences. Materials can be kept easily available for use when the spirit moves. It can become understood by the pupils that when a child has a good idea he can secure time to experiment even if certain prescribed activities have to be postponed or exchanged.

Creative effort and success appear as the flower of fine group feeling, appearing most abundantly where the total group is acting together in fine spirit toward good ends, where small groups spontaneously form and dissolve continuously, and where each self is in lively, deepening give-and-take with other individuals in ever-varying interplay. The group, having reached this condition, needs the best of guidance. The members will already have the inspiration from rich content, genuine purposes, and lively associations. Individual after individual may need protected quiet for the apparently aimless thinking, feeling, and experimenting in solitude from which the creative product often springs. At that point the individual next needs to feel the support of being personally appreciated until he is strong enough to face the judgment of groups and experts on what he has revealed of himself in his product.

Social Living Is Action

A fourth type of endeavor permeates the three already described, and must develop along with them if they are to thrive. This type of endeavor may be called social living. It is seen as the expression of "each for all and all for each." Tendencies toward securing opportunities for the other fellow and

tendencies toward contributing what one can toward the group as a unit are characteristic in members. Basic in the teacher and in each pupil is respect for every other individual as a person. Living that spirit, consciousness of the group grows—its opportunities, its aims, its responsibilities, and its unity.

To induce these four types of activity—class projects, individual programs for mastery, creative endeavors,

and social living—to take place vigorously, is to have a large part of a good program in guidance. To complete this program there will be associated with these four—a fifth type of activity—that developed in personal relationships of child, teacher, and parents in joint efforts to insure to the youngster his most promising program for growth and those associations essential to the overall development of the program.

Getting The Group Habit

RUTH CUNNINGHAM AND ASSOCIATES

Many groups at present are experimenting with techniques for studying the "hows," "whys," and "wherefores" of group behavior. This particular article illustrates the way in which such a study may be a part of curriculum planning for boys and girls, and parents and teachers. Ruth Cunningham is assistant professor, Teachers College, Columbia University, and research associate, Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation. Associates in the experiment described in this article are Anna Elzi, teacher, Grant Junior High School; Marie Farrell, teacher, Emerson School; James Hall, supervisor of research, and Madeline Roberts, teacher, Swansea School—all of the Denver, Colorado, Public Schools. The experiment is one of a number being undertaken in the fourteen associated school centers of the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation, Teachers College, Columbia University.

WHY DO the youngsters laugh when Billy clowns, but say it is "silly" when David does identical things?

Why does the group go wild on certain days and yet act meek as lambs on others?

Why does the group "take to" certain curriculum experiences and reject others which would seem to be equally logical for the age level and maturity of the children?

Why do things go less well with one group than with another even though there are fewer "problem" children?

We have been trying to make a study of group behavior, and we have found that we have much to learn before we

can answer questions such as these.

Every teacher who has made a study of child psychology and human development knows how much these areas have to offer for better teaching. However, the help given is, in large part, in developing an understanding of individuals. No teacher can possibly make an intensive study of every child in his group or groups even though he may do much to learn more about each one. And no matter how much he may wish to work with individuals, he finds that the major portion of his time must be spent in *group* management. Moreover, he finds that a group of youngsters is something over and beyond an aggregation of thirty-five or so individuals.

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