

# Ingenuity Finds a Way

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ANNE HOPPOCK

There are home situations today which make it imperative that young children be exposed to the best possible kind of learning environment. With increasing numbers of children, a shortage of teachers, and a lack of space, what we are agreed is necessity seems, at times, impossible to attain. "But," says Anne Hoppock, "in those school situations blessed with educators possessed of ingenuity and imagination new ways are being found." Miss Hoppock, assistant in elementary education, State Department of Education, Trenton, New Jersey, tells how some schools are succeeding in their quest for a good learning environment for young children.

NATURE has been truly prodigal in blessing us with our professional reason for being—the children. In the five years, 1942-1946, thirteen million babies were born. The year 1946 set an all-time high in the number of births. Teachers are soon going to understand what the Old Woman Who Lived in the Shoe was up against. It is estimated that in about six years there will be six million more children of school age than there are now!

More children call for more teachers and more classrooms. But hand-in-hand with the war babies has come the teacher shortage, building programs delayed by war, and postwar shortages of materials. So, while many young children are fortunate in their school experiences, too many others are going hopefully to school, only to be herded into overcrowded classrooms and forced into the outworn mold of a meagre and inappropriate curriculum.

## Now Is the Time for Doing

If ever there was a particular time when children need a genuinely good school, it is now. Some of our current crop of children come from the warm

security of truly good homes. Their parents, whose values were shaped by the grim war years, earnestly and successfully seek a stable family life.

But the statistics of migration, housing, war casualties, and divorce show the other side of the picture.

- The war has left some children fatherless or with fathers unable to earn the daily bread
- Hasty war marriages followed by divorce have left a trail of broken homes
- Not all of the babies born of ill-considered war-time unions are wanted
- Families, displaced by postwar adjustments in industry, are on the move
- Parents and children who cannot find a place to live crowd into the homes of relatives or into trailer camps
- Even the best of homes are affected to some degree by restlessness and apprehension, the aftermath of war.

So, as the war babies come to school, teachers and the other people concerned with their welfare face a difficult task. In time the solution to problems of teacher shortages and overcrowding will be found, but teachers are painfully conscious that the children now coming to school cannot wait for better days to grow up. Their time is now.

The children's well-being and the common welfare demand that they be given their educational due. The crucial question is *how*.

### Invention Born from Necessity

How can the schools make adequate provisions? This is a hard question and the answer has, admittedly, not been wholly found.

But invention is still the bright child of necessity. When a really tough problem presents itself, it is necessary to call on unused supplies of imagination and ingenuity to find the way out. Teachers and supervisors are beginning to find ways out. These ways are not dramatic, nor are they unique. Some of them are, however, worthy ways which may well become broadly accepted as part of good educational practice.

### New Personnel Sources Tapped

#### *Teacher helpers*

Some schools, after using all possible space, still have overcrowded classrooms. In some of these schools teacher helpers are provided. These schools have employed a second teacher for the room. If a qualified teacher cannot be found, emergency certification makes it possible to employ a person with stable personality and a natural capacity for working with children.

This teacher helper can take over much of the routine work and can gradually learn to handle small groups of children on the playground and in temporarily unused parts of the building. The teacher, left with a relatively small group in the room, has some opportunity to know and guide individual children and can provide activities which require space.

Parents, too, are acting as occasional teacher helpers and are, in the process, becoming better acquainted with their own children's needs and with the purposes of the school.

They may accompany the teacher and children on walks to help safeguard against hazards. A mother may stay at the school with part of the group while the teacher and the rest of the children go exploring. Some mothers are able to take small groups for music or story hour and so relieve the teacher to work with others. And parents can help the teacher of the youngest children with such daily routines as toileting, eating, and resting.

#### *Older youngsters*

Older boys and girls are volunteering to help overburdened teachers of younger children. This plan is proving to be both effective and fruitful. Certainly it is not defensible to provide help by exploiting the older children. But the fact is that these children are profiting so greatly from helping that their teachers are *glad* they are needed.

Thoughtful planning and preparation are necessary when older children help. The children and their teacher consult with their parents and get permission for them to help. A schedule is posted showing the time of day each child or team of children will help and what each will do. They observe the teacher of the younger children do the things they will do later. They help by taking groups of children to the library or a corner of the corridor to hear or dramatize a story or to sing songs they know. They take groups to the playground. They look after children who

are painting or building with blocks or working with tools. They help with daily routines.

They discuss with their own teacher or with the teacher of young children what their function is. They learn to avoid doing for the little children what they can do for themselves. They do not settle a dispute unless it is evident the children cannot settle it for themselves. They help the little children with techniques only when they evidence a need for help. As they have more experience, these young teacher helpers discuss together the problems of child guidance which arise. Some children have kept choice records of their observations.

Teachers of older children are enthusiastic about the values in this plan. The children experience satisfaction in serving the schools. They are learning to enjoy little children and to look with intelligence and understanding at their behavior. They are learning to control themselves. Some have worked hard at such a skill as reading in order to be able to read or tell a story to little children.

#### **Material and Equipment Supplemented**

In order to keep increased numbers of children profitably occupied, more educational materials are needed. "But," some ask, "keep the children busy at what and why?"

So equipment and materials are cooperatively chosen and purchased by teacher, supervisor, administrator, and board members; and the developmental needs of children become more apparent to all concerned. How to use what is supplied calls for re-thinking such matters as the daily program, the guid-

ance of the children, and the arrangement of the room. When strong feeling that meagre equipment and materials must be supplemented is aroused, fathers and high school boys in the school shops can build materials to add to what is purchased.

#### **Children Learn Independence**

When a teacher has a large group of children, it becomes positively necessary that they develop the capacity to work and play without constant supervision. Otherwise no small group activity is possible and they have to sit still and be quiet much of the day.

Teachers are analyzing what is involved in helping the children to become more independent. Some are discovering that child-teacher planning is necessary. They are taking time to teach the children where to find the materials they need, simple techniques for using them, and how to care for them and put them away. The children help formulate whatever rules are necessary when a large group carries on varied activities.

Some teachers are saying that perhaps they have been teaching so hard that the children haven't had a chance to learn. They are finding that children are more creative and ingenuous when they work with materials and ideas free from adult domination. They are feeling that it is worth all the time and patience it takes to help children learn to control themselves.

#### **Parent Groups Solve Problems**

Perhaps the most important constructive gain has been made in awakening the people to the needs of young children and getting them to help solve

current problems. Parent groups, organized when the children enter school, or perhaps the spring before, are continuing to stay together as their children progress through school.

In a small school the mothers of the five- and six-year-olds were invited by the teacher and supervisor to come to tea. The parents came early enough to see the children at work and stayed after school to talk things over. They thought through what children of this age need, what was lacking in the school for meeting the needs, and what they could do together to make a better school for their children.

"On the surface," the young supervisor said, "things looked pretty hopeless—an emergency teacher who had taught only upper grades, twice as many children as one teacher should have crowded in one small room, not enough equipment and material, and parents who had not seen anything especially wrong about the situation! But everybody took part in the discussion and helped plan. We thought up some won-

derful ideas and I believe that, in time, we'll have something we can be proud of."

This story, told in varying forms by many teachers and supervisors, embodies the cooperative approach which many communities are making. More homes and schools are inevitably coming closer together in their purposes and methods in guiding children.

#### Today Tells Tomorrow's Story

There is nothing in this discussion to imply that makeshifts are acceptable. Vigilance is necessary so that we do not become satisfied with half sessions, with overcrowded classrooms, with less than the best teachers.

One important outcome of the present emergency can be a clearer understanding by all concerned as to what constitutes a genuinely good school. It is satisfying to realize that in meeting the emergency we are re-evaluating our programs and employing resources and techniques which will hasten the coming of such schools.

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**SUMMER NEWS OF INTEREST TO YOU**—The Second National Training Laboratory in Group Development sponsored by the NEA and the Research Center for Group Dynamics, with the cooperation of several universities, will be held at Gould Academy, Bethel, Maine, from June 14 to July 3. This laboratory offers the opportunity for action leaders, educators, and social scientists to cooperate in an experimental approach to problems of training and action research. Basic skills of human relations and techniques of stimulating group growth and productivity will be analyzed, tested, and practiced.

Delegates are being selected from among administrators, supervisors, trainers, consultants in social science, counselors, teachers, and organizational leaders in the areas of education, industry, government, labor, agriculture, community work, social welfare, and other professions and fields of action. For further information and application blanks write to Leland P. Bradford, Division of Adult Education Services of the NEA, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C.

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