And these barefoot children who cut their hair in the spring are required to read about chimpanzees and monkeys and about skyscrapers and elevated trains! Can it be that some teachers have left the teaching profession because they could not remain in it and retain their self-respect? Is it possible that those who set course of study requirements should bear some of the responsibility for the present crisis in education?

Modern Settings for Learning

LAURA ZIRBES

In this comprehensive treatment of the kind of learning environment necessary for today's children, Laura Zirbes, professor of education at Ohio State University, Columbus, touches upon many aspects—the physical setting in which children live, the resources for group endeavor, desirable motivation to learning. She looks at learnings in several fields—reading, arithmetic, social studies, science, art—in relation to the kind of setting in which they develop most desirably.

SCHOOLS OF TOMORROW will soon be dotting the map all over the land. Many of them will aspire to "the new look," incorporating some of the innumerable advances in design and construction which have been predicted and publicized in recent years.

Developments in scientific illumination and ventilation, heating, insulation, and acoustics will be represented in the planning of new schools and in the improvement of old ones. Advances in structural engineering make it possible to project buildings which utilize new products and facilitate new arrangements, although costs and scarcities still deter the actual process of building.

A Functional Setting for Learning

Functionalism has challenged not only traditionalism in architecture and industrial design. It is just as important to consider educational functions, resources, and activities in planning a modern classroom as it is to conceive the kitchen of a home as part of the design for carrying on the functions of modern family living. The psychology of color is no less important for schoolrooms than it is for factories and business offices. Modern educational equipment and built-in facilities for the use and orderly storage of books, records, materials, and aids are as essential to effective work, order, and organization in schools as they are in military or industrial establishments.

The educational values which characterize a democratic American community school of the middle of this Twentieth Century call for quite another setting than those which were accepted and transplanted here from Central Europe in the Nineteenth Cen-
tury before the cultural and educational resources of our country were developed. The democratic relationships of parents and teachers, the sense of common interests, the spirit of team work—all these are contingent on places to meet and worthwhile undertakings.

Space and Sunlight for All

Many of the anachronistic school plants of America need to be reconceived and reconditioned in order that they may not continue to hamper and frustrate the very values which they should serve. Compulsory attendance at places that are unfit for human habitation is indefensible. Rural schools, in particular, need to be modernized.

Some city schools need to be relocated so that children who live in the heart of the crowded city may have some of the advantages of space and sun and air, which more fortunate families secure by selling out and moving into residential suburbs. It would not be unreasonable to transport children from crowded urban industrial centers to publicly owned country day schools adjacent to parks and playgrounds. Old school sites, hemmed in by commercial and industrial establishments and associated with special health, fire, and traffic hazards, are often plagued with social handicaps that contribute to delinquency and crime. Such sites might be abandoned and sold as very desirable real property to be developed for industrial use, releasing public funds for the relocation of schools.

Guides from Research

But it is not enough to look to the building profession and related fields for ideas on better environments for learning. Many of the improvements in structure, arrangement, and equipment will be based on advances in education. Many of these, in turn, are soundly based on scientific studies of child health, human growth and development, nutrition, psychology, and mental health. Changing social conditions and social needs also call for educational adjustments. What are the implications for school planning?

Today’s school is a different institution from its historical antecedent. Its social purpose and its educational program have changed, as have our conceptions of human growth and learning. Furthermore, our respect for salutary conditions of school living has a broad base which properly subordinates minimal cost to factors that make for optimal health and wellbeing.

Classrooms for Real Living

The dingy grays and dark browns that were selected and standardized for school use because they wore well and did not show the dirt have given place to colors which lighten and brighten classrooms and corridors. The fixed furniture designed for easy upkeep, passive learning, and mass management becomes anachronistic when schools seek to emphasize “learning by doing” and foster flexible groupings in terms of cooperative endeavor.

The face-front, teacher-centered arrangement gives way to one in which a number of centers of group activity are functionally equipped and arrayed. The attractiveness of a reading nook, a book table, and handy, well-stocked shelves are not limited to libraries and modern homes. Every classroom needs a special place that contributes to the develop-
ment of abiding interests in books as sources of satisfaction. Similarly, a science corner or table with facilities for direct inquiry, observation, and experiment is not only conducive to readiness for laboratory study of science, but emphasizes the role of science in modern life in ways which develop respect for scientific method and potential abilities in scientific fields. Bulletin boards with their timely emphasis on current affairs of local, national, and world-wide interest help to cultivate social awareness and expanding outlook.

Learning in a Wider Setting

Only when the modern classroom works or functions in the active, dynamic processes of education is it acceptable as an environment for learning. For that reason it is often advisable to adjourn to the wider setting which community study offers for social learnings and first-hand experiences upon which subsequent classroom discussion and work may be based. The continuity between school and life outside the school is all too often broken when the school set-up suggests an academic isolation of learning from life and social contexts, or separates subjects in ways which obscure or disrupt their bearing on each other or their integration in non-academic situations of life.

Unless school learnings are actually carried on in ways which contribute to carry-over, the school has not done what it should to set the environment for learning. The dead-end quality of meaningless, isolated learnings is responsible for rapid forgetting, for low morale, for dependence on coercive pressure and extrinsic motivation. Schools which follow such a course provide environments for unsocial learning and conditions for social maladjustment.

Resources for Group Endeavor

Learning to plan and work together cooperatively and responsibly at worthwhile tasks is not facilitated in an environment which is set for arbitrary, autocratic control. The democratically organized classroom may be recognized by sight and by reference to the motives and purposes which impel individuals and relate them to each other. Environments which do not lend themselves to purposeful group activity encourage individualism and aggressive, self-centered behavior. They minimize the dynamic and social values on which the development of fine personalities and good societies depend. Individual assignments and prescribed lessons or exercises in workbooks may emphasize very specific skills in isolation; but, by contrast, the essential skills and attitudes of social adjustment and democratic human relations develop only in a social setting which provides diverse resources and opportunities for challenging group endeavor and guidance which respects democratic values.

The assumption that there is a basic incompatibility between such social and personal values and knowledge or skill needs to be challenged. We have too long treated social and personal values as incidental, unpredictable, and secondary, giving primacy and emphasis to the so-called fundamentals in ways which reduce their significance in spite of these priorities. A functional, purposeful approach to any one of the so-called three R’s makes its personal and social values central and integral, not
casual or incidental. Skills are used and learned in ways which carry over when the environment is set for such social, personal guidance and development.

The Situational Approach

An impoverished or meager environment is not conducive to richness of association, interest, or action. Lack of stimulus, overstimulation, and distraction all complicate learning. Recourse to extrinsic motivation is a temporary expedient but is seldom conducive to intrinsic motives or to wholehearted purposive effort. It is, therefore, preferable that guidance seek to confront the learner with a situation or an environmental setting that provides an intrinsic challenge to purposive effort. This makes prods, bribes, threats, rewards, penalties, and pressures superfluous. When the situation challenges purposive action, the learner's responses are coordinated and directed by his own purposes instead of being the result of compliance to a series or sequence of commands or directions.

All this makes it very important to provide an environment which offers sufficient challenge or suggestion to initiate interest and sufficient resources to carry purposive action forward in self-directive fashion. To get this process well started so that it becomes a way of life and a way of relating each learner to others in many mutually satisfactory ways is the crux of education. Because it is concerned with developing a way of responding to life situations, typical life situations and problems are preferable as points of departure and as cues to self-direction. The mature person or the specialist can respond to a more or less abstract suggestion, but the purposes of early and general education are better served by situational approaches.

Reading in a Natural Setting

A child learns to talk by living in an environment in which everyone talks to him and to everyone else. He hears talk, responds to talk, interprets talk, tries to talk, learns to talk; because talking serves his purposes and satisfies some of his needs in a social environment. The beginnings of reading could be just as gradual and natural.

The development of broader and higher reading tastes depends on frequent opportunity for contact with a rich array of books—for browsing, selecting, sharing; for dramatizing and illustrating stories; for discovering and exploring new fields. The environment which develops reading readiness is not properly a narrow funnel which merely provides induction into a specific primer. It is rather a setting in which classroom reading may become an open sesame to intelligent library use, to study, and to the wider values and opening vistas of reading in life.

Guidance in Creative Expression

The valid induction into art is not the formal abstraction of elements of design for later application, nor the over simplification which impresses stereotyped techniques by instruction, models, and patterns. An environment which is hospitable to beauty of color, form, and line, and with facilities for creative expression does more than didactic instruction.

Wise, early guidance requires an environment which favors free exploratory manipulation of many mediums
and materials of art, and relates the challenge of free, creative expression to vital, first-hand experiences. Constructive effort requires accessible tools and challenging outlets, but it curbs destructive impulses.

Provision for Number Learnings

Even the much maligned and frequently feared field of mathematics suffers from inadequate environmental provisions when books and lessons bring the abstracted array of combinations, facts, rules, and processes to bear on children without benefit of concrete materials. When conditions and experiences do not favor the grasp of number relations and recognize the social usefulness of measurement, all but the ablest of children are needlessly confounded and confused.

The high incidence of failures and remedial cases should challenge inquiry and lead to measures which make arithmetic a ready tool for understanding and dealing with quantitative phases of the environment with insight, skill, and satisfaction. Measures can be taken which enable young children to work and play together in an environment which provides a wealth of guided experiences in grouping, measuring, estimating, comparing, and checking numbers of concrete objects and quantities of material for real life purposes.

Realistic Bases for Understanding

The environment for social studies is, of course, the widening horizon of the child’s own living. The home, the school, the neighborhood, the community, the nearby farm or airport, the depot and harbor, the trucks and highways, the factories and markets are all features of the environment for learning that open the way to social understanding—and make pictures, maps, books, news, studies, and work mean much more. It is only from such realistic bases and such direct social experience that wholesome human relations and intelligent world citizenship may be projected.

To restrict school science to verbal material in books makes the books far less interesting and meaningful. It denies children the first-hand basis for a realization of the pervasive implications of science for everyday life. It narrows the scope of science needlessly and over-emphasizes organized printed knowledge in the years when first-hand observations and discriminations are a developmental essential to sustained interests and maturing aptitudes.

An educative environment should give children encouragement and resources for raising pet animals; collecting, mounting, and organizing specimens for exhibits; using magnets, microscopes, and other scientific instruments; taking an old clock or radio apart and putting it together again; visiting museums, laboratories, or industries where scientific processes are carried on; making and using chemical solutions for various practical purposes.

Modern psychology and mental hygiene emphasize the situational aspects and contingencies of learning. The modern teacher seeks to apply such insights by guiding purposeful experience in ways which are conducive to carry-over. The optimal development of personalities and the realization of the social objectives with which democratic education is concerned require environments conducive to such learnings.