

Learning Group Skills in Teacher Education

JEAN GRAMBS

In the teacher training program of Stanford University's School of Education major emphasis is placed on the development of democratic group skills. Mrs. Jean Grambs, assistant professor of education, describes those aspects of the program that give teachers-in-training an opportunity to become proficient in group participation both as members of peer groups and as leaders in youth groups.

WE WILL DEVELOP democratic classroom teachers to the degree that in teacher education we provide experiences that are themselves democratic. One cannot learn how to behave democratically by reading about it.

The emphasis upon group techniques in the teacher education program at the Stanford School of Education evolved from two lines of inquiry. One line recognized the fundamental significance of an operational understanding of the group as a basic social unit, whether this group be seen as the family, the office staff, the club, the classroom, or the school faculty. Thus democratic leadership operates within the limits of a system of value judgments about group goals and individual needs.

The other line of reasoning that has so far supported the utilization of group techniques has developed as a result of continuous curriculum planning and research in the teacher education program. From this point of view, a list of teacher competencies developed by the teacher education faculty and doctoral seminar group becomes a yardstick against which to evaluate the accomplishments of the program. Using group processes then becomes one of a number of newer approaches to teacher educa-

tion to be studied and tested in terms of the degree to which they contribute to producing the kind of teacher we want. A number of studies on both the Master's and Doctor's level have already been made, and a number are in progress pointed in this direction.

DEVELOPING GROUP TECHNIQUES

The candidates for teaching credentials have many opportunities to learn group work skills in the sequence of professional courses. One approach is as a member of a peer group in various learning situations; the other approach is as an adult leader of children's voluntary groups in social group work agencies.

As a Member of a Peer Group

The experience of working as a member of a peer group in learning activities is provided for the teachers-in-training in at least four of the major courses in the professional program for the elementary and secondary credential candidates. In the Introduction to Education course (sophomores and juniors), the first group activity is provided. Here students with similar professional goals visit schools and together evaluate what they find. Many of the

groups develop extensive projects as they seek through actual observation and interview to learn more about the educational area of their choice.

In the "foundations" courses (educational hygiene, psychology, and sociology) group techniques play a large part. In educational hygiene, volunteer groups explore various school and community problems related to the physical and mental health of the school child. In educational psychology, groups are formed to think through the significance of psychological findings for teaching methodology. The groups also write together a "learning unit" as a major activity.

In educational sociology, the students participate in a community study to observe for themselves the real community that lies behind the social statistics. The groups, ranging in size from four to twelve members, are usually based on common educational interest, social problem selected, or both. The purpose of the group activity is to help students go through most of the steps involved in a community study, solving for themselves the many intricate problems encountered on the way, and also to help them become more aware of the group process itself. For this reason, the problem that is presented is deliberately unstructured.

A group may, for instance, decide to explore the nature of the leisure-time program available to youth in a local community. How does one find out? From the City Hall, Chamber of Commerce, man on the street? What constitutes a good recreation program? If two sources of information are contradictory, how do you know whom to believe? Why should an English

teacher, an art teacher, a science teacher, be concerned about leisure? The groups very rapidly find themselves involved in these and countless other problems that are genuine, important, and considerably more real than any textbook presentation.

It is possible that individuals by themselves could pursue a similar sort of community study. However, the use of groups for such a purpose seems to us to be important. As many students have remarked, "I have learned so much more because there were five of us contributing ideas." Or, "I never could have covered so many aspects of the problem by myself." Again, the values of cooperative learning cannot be developed by reading alone; they must be experienced.

Not only is cooperative *learning* important, but cooperative *living* as well. The group situation provides an opportunity for these future teachers to try out their skills as members and leaders of groups. The students see how a group may utilize individual contributions, the way in which friendships develop, and ways in which actual personality traits may be modified for more adequate social participation.

The faculty has noted a rise in student morale as a result of successful group experiences. The lonely, the fringer, the cynical, the reluctant, as they become accepted by a group, drop many of their a-social attitudes and behaviors.

Faculty observation of the behavior of students in groups may identify some students who need special guidance and help. Not all of the groups are able to have successful learning experiences. This is due in part to the

newness of this technique; there are many unsolved problems in utilizing group process in teacher training.

It is also true that although some individuals cannot work well together, each individual may be a competent member of a learning group. We feel that the use of group methods in a number of our professional courses should, as we learn more about the best ways of establishing and guiding group experiences, provide every student with at least one successful experience with group learning.

As Adult Leader

The other way in which group techniques are explored is through providing opportunities for teacher candidates to lead voluntary youth groups. This experience is the major out-of-class assignment for all secondary credential students in their general methods course immediately preceding student teaching. Previously the student has been a member of a peer group involved in a learning activity. Now he moves into a new role, that of adult-status-leader or assistant leader in a group.

Again, important new concepts become a part of immediate student learning: How does one discipline a group? When can a group of youngsters discipline themselves? What must the leader do to assist this process? Is a similar approach feasible in the high school classroom? In English, mathematics, industrial arts? Classroom management as a problem in group activity can be clearly seen as the student discusses these questions and many others that arise naturally in groups of young people. While community agencies have been used in teacher education in

some teacher training institutions, the utilization of the group leadership experience as one leading to competence in organizing group learning situations in the classroom is, we believe, unique.

The net effect of these varied emphases on group experience can be seen now in student teaching. Many of the student teachers plan and direct learning units which incorporate group work. Many such units have been introduced in high school classes where such an approach is all too rare. Teachers on the job following this training experience are using group methods in their classes.

What Are the Results?

Do the students like this new approach? It has been found that few college students are prepared for cooperative work. Even those most active in extra-curricular activities are slightly shocked when asked to work as a group member in a learning situation. Some students react enthusiastically to the new freedom for self-directed learning; others are very negative towards the whole process.

Recurrent samplings of student opinion indicate that the group projects were enjoyed and appreciated by at least three-fourths of the students. There are students who do not at any time seem to accept the group work, and there are others who fail to see the applicability of this process to their own teaching responsibility. We have found that often students who were lukewarm about the group activities and even downright offended, reappear a year or so later with a kind of half-chagrined attitude to report a change of mind; that on reflection and with actual experience

in teaching, the group processes explored in their training remain as among the most valuable training experiences.

The utilization of group processes in teacher education is a very significant innovation. It might be added that such methods applied to college instruction may in time help to meet some of the recognized inefficiencies of higher education. A group of instructors from several departments of the University of California, San Francisco State College, San Francisco City College, and the School of Education at Stanford, have been meeting informally during the past year for an exchange of experiences in the use of group techniques on the college level. The courses in which group work is being used

range from introductory sociology and psychology to graduate seminars in social group work and public health, as well as the various phases of education as described here.

Our experiences with this exploratory use of group techniques in teacher training indicate that this approach has a genuine contribution to make to changing behavior on the adult level. As we learn more about this method, its limitations and possibilities, it is expected that many modifications in our present activities will occur. We feel, however, that with this tool we have made important forward strides in developing the kind of program that is required if we are to train teachers who are really democratic.

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