

- Those which would have *emotional impact* on the students.
- Those which would provide opportunities to *try* the values.

Through use of the process of critical thinking the students found a way of becoming more competent in making decisions. They became aware of their responsibility for exercising care in reaching conclusions.

Miss James saw her pupils' need for firsthand experiences in getting the facts, and for having a more realistic basis for judging the relative merits of facts and opinions. The visits to City Council and the interviews with officials served this purpose.

In order to determine whether the values they considered desirable were operating in their own school, the students were given an opportunity to examine critically their own student government.

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In the mid-twentieth century, when our nation is one of the parts of the world that would free the minds of men, the development of open-mindedness must be viewed as a major objective of education. It requires the cooperative effort of all of us irrespective of the grade or the subject we teach. Will you join us in leading pupils toward open-mindedness?

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## ‘Culture Units’ and Social Education

WANDA ROBERTSON

**Penetrating analysis of effects of the “culture unit” approach to the social education of children is given by Professor Wanda Robertson, University of Utah, Salt Lake City.**

WHEN WE CONSIDER the shocking conditions which currently prevail in our highly interdependent and explosive world, it becomes clear that the most important task facing education today is that of building a world of people who *can* and *want* to live together. Science and technology have now made possible a world of unimagined splendor. But at the same time they have created hazards in human living which now threaten to destroy our present great civilization. Radio, television, rocket planes, industrial processes, improved farming methods, atomic energy—we have them all. But

how are we going to use them constructively to build a better world in which all people can live together with mutual respect and concern for one another's welfare?

### Practices Need Examination

Today it is abundantly clear that if education is to develop citizens who can cope with these vital problems its present practices must be reappraised and reoriented to the age in which we live. Such an appraisal means that each method of instruction, both old and new, must be scrutinized in the light of certain fundamental social goals. For

example, does the practice develop citizens with a working knowledge of the social, economic and political forces at work in our society, and does it contribute to a realistic understanding of the ways in which these forces harmonize or conflict in promoting the general human welfare?

Does the practice develop men, women and children with strong moral convictions and courage to do something about improving conditions of human living? Does it build in people an abiding faith in democratic principles and practices as a way of life? Does it promote the kind of understanding and appreciation of people on which world cooperation and peace rest? Does it build citizens with the kind of scientific thinking which will enable them to meet unpredictable and unprecedented problems with greater skill as they attempt to deal with a fast and ever-changing world? And finally, does it contribute to the development of value systems on which decisions based upon critical thinking and sound judgment can be made?

#### 'CULTURE UNIT' METHOD

When methods of instruction are seen in the light of these goals, it becomes doubtful whether there is a single method in the elementary school which requires a more careful re-evaluation than that commonly known as the "culture unit" method or the "developmental study of cultures."

For many years an almost standardized body of units on foreign cultures has been accepted by a large number of schools throughout the country. As a result, units on Holland, China, Eskimos, or life in the jungle, to mention

but a few, have comprised a major part of the elementary curriculum from the third through the sixth grades. Indeed, in some schools this program begins as early as the second grade. So standardized have these teaching materials and procedures become that units prepared in California or Alabama have been taught in much the same way by teachers in Maine or New Mexico.

#### Certain Variations Exist

While certain variations exist in the culture unit method, the plan which is commonly followed is to begin in the early grades with study of simple cultures, such as that of the Eskimos or of the Indians and to proceed gradually to more complex cultures. After the selection has been made, various aspects of life within the culture are then studied as comprehensively as possible in order to understand how these people meet their basic needs of living as compared with our own methods of meeting these needs. This is supposedly achieved by having children engage in a wide range of activities such as painting, dancing, dramatic play or construction work, and by correlating the various subject matter areas as closely as possible to the content of the culture being studied. By this method, spelling, reading and music, among other subjects, are centered on the life within the culture group.

In order to highlight the differences which exist in other cultures as compared with our own, groups presenting the most vivid contrasts are usually selected for study. For many years this selection has been made, and continues to be made, chiefly on the culture's geographical location. This has resulted

in units and textbook material devoted to life in the hot-dry lands, the cold lands, or the lowlands of the earth. A more recent tendency is toward selecting the culture for study in relation to its tools and technics.

### Evaluation of Unit Method

There is ample evidence that many children in the elementary schools have enjoyed themselves greatly in their study of foreign cultures. In some situations they have participated more actively in the planning of their programs; in others, the opportunity to engage in numerous activities has been challenging and interesting. There is also ample evidence that many children have been bored by similar studies. However, the question with which we are concerned is whether children learn through this method the kind of social understanding and skills which will enable them to come to actual grips with their own world, as proponents of this method claim.

Relevant to this evaluation are three basic issues: (1) How do children develop their social understanding, which means *doing* as well as *knowing*, and what happens when they must learn about it through the study of remote and distant cultures? (2) Does the culture unit method build, as its advocates claim, desirable kinds of understanding and appreciation of the peoples of the world? (3) Does learning proceed from the simple to the complex as this method assumes?

#### APPROACHES TO SOCIAL LEARNINGS

For many years a large number of educators have held to the belief that the child learned best about his world by

studying it from afar. Since he was considered too immature to cope with problems about him, and too removed from society, they suggested that he should be protected from the harsher realities of life. After studying his world from a safe distance it was thought that he would emerge later as an adult citizen who could and would participate responsibly in his social world.

Contrary to this philosophy, modern research in the field of child growth and development shows the child not only to be an integral part of his world but an active participant in it on his own level of maturity. Observation of his activities in his home, school and community shows further that he is daily coming in contact with situations which require planning, cooperation, assumption of responsibility, use of critical thinking and the ability to make moral judgments as he attempts to solve problems which have real and important consequences for himself and others.

Psychologists are in general agreement today that children are not born with preconceived ways of thinking and behaving toward others. Rather, they learn their ways of thinking, feeling and acting as they participate in concrete situations where it is possible to practice these skills. In other words, children learn their social understandings and skills by doing. Social understanding which means *doing* something constructive about problems as well as *knowing* about them is rooted in experience.

#### Rich Firsthand Contacts Necessary

When we focus our attention on the way children learn, it becomes evident that we do not give them meanings,

but rather we help them to construct their own meanings from the experiences we make possible for them. Words mean only what they stand for in experience. Therefore, vicarious learnings must proceed on the basis of analogy. Since firsthand experience is basic to a more effective use of vicarious experiences it is obvious that the richer the firsthand contacts with people, processes and social institutions, the more beneficial will be the secondary sources of information.

Indeed, firsthand experience is commonly regarded as the most efficient, if not the only safe base on which to build constructive social concepts and attitudes. While it is well recognized that firsthand experience cannot yield full value unless it is reinforced by vicarious learnings, it is equally well established that it is only upon a broad background of rich and direct experience that sound generalizations can be drawn with respect either to modern life or to primitive cultures. Unless firsthand experience has been adequate and satisfying there is great danger that misconceptions, unwarranted assumptions and wrong attitudes will develop.

#### EFFECTS OF 'CULTURE UNIT' STUDY

What happens then when children must learn about modern life through the study of remote and distant cultures? One of the most important happenings is that the present is subordinated to a study of the past. For example, when children study about Norway, a considerable portion of their time is spent on the folklore of the Norsemen or the adventures of the Vikings. Relatively little attention is paid to life as it is actually lived today in

Oslo, Bergen, or in rural sections of Norway. Similarly, when children begin their studies of their own communities, they are hastened quickly to the Indians of long ago and spend practically their entire time on the distant past in relation to these people.

Another important result is that undue emphasis is placed upon make-believe and imaginative activities. Through dramatic play children relive the life of the Eskimo by dramatizing the seal hunt or by constructing a paper igloo. In some units on Holland and Latin America which were examined by the writer, the proposal was made that children do the dances of the milk bottles and the bananas. The unreality of such experiences not only divorces children from engaging in real problems related to Eskimos, Holland, or Latin America, but fails to indicate vital connection with life in our own society.

Closely akin to the imaginative nature of learning which ensues is the tendency to look at peoples of other cultures as queer, exotic, picturesque and unusual. When this happens a kind of stereotyping occurs which is extremely detrimental to the development of scientific thinking which is needed for a realistic understanding of the peoples of the world. Too often the Indian is pictured as a fast-riding horseman, a scalping savage, and a tepee-dweller. Similarly, the Japanese is shown only as an artistic woman in colorful kimono strolling beneath the cherry blossoms.

That such unrealistic ways of thinking are incompatible with the scientific approach needed so desperately today in the field of human relations can

readily be seen. Moreover, such practices usually result not only in a superficial understanding of other people but they contribute to a corresponding practice of constantly judging people of other cultures in the light of our own scientific and technological achievements. "Do they measure up to our own high standards of living?" is one of the most common questions asked in educational literature dealing with the culture unit method. When primitive cultures are compared with highly industrialized societies children frequently develop the unhealthy attitude that we are superior and they are less smart than we.

### Reliance Upon Materials

But not the least important problem resulting from studies of modern life through remote and distant cultures is the heavy reliance which is placed upon textbooks and other printed materials, and the acceptance of a more verbal method of learning. When this happens children spend most of their time reading and discussing problems instead of doing things about them. Consequently, they are expected to deal with textbook content which in itself is filled with generalizations and abstractions beyond the comprehension of elementary school children.

Indeed, it is possible that children who spend their time with the more verbal aspects of learning, as they deal with remote and distant cultures, may actually prefer not to cope with the more vigorous and dynamic problems in the fast moving tempo of twentieth-century life. In such instances the study of remote cultures becomes an escape from reality.

When the social growth of children is taken into consideration a second major question is raised with respect to the effectiveness of the culture units for social education. This question is whether the culture unit develops the kind of understanding and appreciation of peoples of the world, both at home and in other lands, which advocates of this method suggest.

In general, studies in the field of social attitudes<sup>1</sup> tend to reveal two things: first, that children, like their parents and other adults, show a strong preference for certain national, racial and religious groups in keeping with a national climate of opinion which exists in this country; and second, that children, again like adults, tend to look at people both at home and abroad in terms of culture-imposed stereotypes.

### Home and Community Shape Attitudes

Moreover, these studies also show the school, operated as it has often been in the past, to be one of the least effective agencies in shaping children's attitudes, particularly when it is compared with other forces which influence the thinking and feelings of people. There is little question that the most important single institution which colors and shapes children's attitudes is the home. There is ample evidence today to show that children have many strong feelings about other peoples when they enter school for the first time. Since

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed treatment of this problem see *An Evaluation of the Culture Unit Method for Social Education* by the writer. Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1950.

the home is one of the greatest guarantors of the culture as it exists, many of the attitudes which children hold are of a stereotyped nature and fit the preferences of adults.

Important also in shaping children's attitudes is the community. This is understandable since it is in the matrix of the community's culture mores that the home derives most of its patterns of thinking. The community shapes the child's attitudes in a number of ways: first, by perpetuating the national climate of opinion; second, by determining the kind of experiences he will have; and third, by its pattern of social structuring.

It is a common observation, supported by research, that the people of this country show marked preferences for white-skinned people of Northern European background while they tend to reject darker-skinned people such as Japanese, Turks, Hindus and the American Negro. It is also a common observation that such things as a community's location, its age, size and occupations influence children's attitudes.

In addition, the structuring of the community directly influences the attitudes which the child holds about himself and others. To be a member of a Mexican-American family, a child in an old-American family in certain New England cities, to live on the top of the hill or the wrong side of the tracks is to hold a certain status which affects an individual's feeling about himself and others. It also determines to a large extent the degree to which he will be accepted or rejected in his community.

### **Agencies Influence Attitudes**

Among other agencies which shape

the attitudes of children are those which deal with mass communication. These agencies include radio, moving pictures, television, newspapers and the library. Through their emphasis on the colorful and dramatic, and through their pleasurable presentations of ideas, learning becomes an enjoyable experience. But like the home and the community these agencies also perpetuate the concepts and attitudes pertaining to people at home and in other lands which the local and national cultures in this country accept and approve.

There is an abundance of evidence that the elementary school child does not learn his basic attitudes about the peoples of the world through foreign culture units. Instead he learns them in his day-by-day association with people about him. Moreover, he learns early in life what it means to live in one neighborhood as contrasted with another, to attend a particular church instead of another, and to wear certain clothes.

Before he has advanced very far in the elementary school he has learned that it is better to belong to certain religious, racial, national and socio-economic groups than to others. He becomes sensitive to group differences when he is cautioned not to play with children who are "dirty," "mean," or perhaps of a different skin color. Soon he begins to associate dirt, meanness and skin color with particular people and to place a value judgment on them.

In other words, he learns his basic ideas about the peoples of the world by his immediate experiences within his own community. *World understanding is not an abstraction; it constitutes a kind of living that goes on between*

*nations and peoples everywhere.* In order to attribute worth and appreciation to people in faraway lands it first becomes essential to extend feeling of worth and dignity to one's neighbors. Moreover, to do this, the child must feel that he is an important person himself. Basic to the development of world understanding is the need for building such security in every child.

### **Children React Differently**

Integral to this problem is the claim that children of minority backgrounds are helped to adjust more easily through the culture units. While a feeling of pride may be instilled in some children, vast numbers of boys and girls react in a completely different manner. At a time in their lives when they want more than anything else to be like their classmates and to be accepted on equal terms, the study of their parents' cultures tends to set them apart and in some cases to make them feel too different. In some units, children have been seen to develop feelings of hostility and shame for their parents and the countries from which their parents originally came.

### **Children Develop Their Own Logic**

Our final concern is whether learning proceeds from the simple to the complex as this method assumes. Do children who beat out the kernels of grain with a flail, or who dramatize other early methods of harvesting grain possess a better understanding of complicated machinery and processes of harvesting today? Or do children who begin with ancient civilizations and move through the middle ages to the present develop a working knowledge of con-

temporary life or a clearly defined concept of the time sequence?

There is little evidence, if any, to show this to be the case. In the first place, studies of children's time concepts show elementary pupils to think of time chiefly in relation to their own experiences. These studies also reveal children of this age level to have only the haziest ideas of eras, ages, or epochs of the past. They show also that when children work with problems within their realm of experience they develop their own logic with respect to time.

There is also evidence that learning takes place most effectively through functional use of ideas rather than through their sequential development. The child who has experience with trains, boats, or airplanes is much better prepared to understand modern transportation than is the child who devotes his time to study of the Eskimo kayak or the Indian travois. In a similar way machinery and social processes take on greater meaning for the child when seen in relation to the performance of their functions than when studied by the genetic approach from the simple to the complex.

### **All Cultures Are Complex**

Cultural anthropologists warn against the loose construction of the term or concept, *simple culture*, particularly when a culture is seen in its dynamic and functional interrelationships. These scientists remind us that the social, economic and political arrangements in the most simple culture are extremely complex when understood in the light of these relationships. They point further to the fallacy of attributing complexity to an industrial culture

and simplicity to a non-industrialized one.

What is simple and what is complex? The answer to this question is largely dependent upon the meanings that are attached to the terms. What is simple to one person may not necessarily be simple to another. Or what is considered complex in one situation or at one time may not be seen as difficult in another situation or at another time. These terms are relative in meaning depending upon the individual.

When the importance of firsthand experience is seen in the development of children's social understanding, it becomes clear that the selection and em-

phasis in the elementary school curriculum can be based most effectively on problems of living which children actually face and not upon past civilizations and foreign cultures. Also, when the ineffectiveness of the culture unit method is seen for social education it becomes evident that a reversal needs to be made in the way in which foreign cultures are studied on this level. Problems of modern life need to receive major attention, with the culture units being called upon to explain them. To study remote and distant cultures as an attempt to develop an understanding of contemporary life is to put the cart before the horse.

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## *Cooperative Project in Human Relations*

THE PROJECT STAFF<sup>1</sup>

**Los Angeles County has evolved a cooperative project in human relations as a practical approach to in-service education.**

PHENOMENAL GROWTH—new businesses, new cars, new homes, communities of forty thousand in areas which were bean and barley fields less than five years ago—this has become the accepted growth pattern in Los Angeles County. But, exceeding even this fast growing pace has been the development of the Los Angeles County Project in Human Relations.

After a series of preliminary conferences among school officials, the project was launched in September 1949 by three city school systems. By January

1950 the three original districts had grown to thirteen. In September 1950, twenty-one school systems were participating in the project.

### PURPOSES OF THE PROJECT

What is this project? What does it attempt to accomplish? Millions of words have been spoken and written about democracy, but just what does this concept mean in everyday living? What understandings, what knowledges and skills must people have in order to live democratically as individuals, as group members, as citizens of America and of the world? The Human Relations Project addresses itself to the consideration of these problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Gertrude G. Howard, Staff Consultant and Editor. Caroline Tryon, Robert Bartlett Haas, Staff Consultants. William Jack Stone, General Consultant and Director.

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