

Classroom Atmosphere Reflects Quality of Learning

W. THEO DALTON

What are qualities of a good setting for learning? W. Theo Dalton, Professor of Education, University of Georgia, Athens, examines these qualities and tells of classroom situations which exemplify them.

THE GOOD classroom is characterized by a relaxed atmosphere, by evidences of wholesome and purposeful activities, by displays of children's work and by the best use of available facilities. Such a classroom may be said to possess in a real sense an atmosphere which makes itself felt in the presence of even a casual visitor.

Classroom atmosphere is a composite of several factors. Foremost, the teacher is a relaxed, well-poised, enthusiastic person. His professional manner is spiced with a keen sense of humor. There is an air of confidence and of calm about him. He is a master of the art of good human relations.

The pupils reflect an attitude which can come only from mutual respect and admiration. The program runs systematically, but not inflexibly so. As teacher and pupils plan and work together, an orderly approach to problem-solving becomes predominant. Boys and girls work together in small and large groups to complete projects and seek information.

This classroom workshop is a laboratory for learning. Purposeful centers of interest, well-arranged bulletin boards and good housekeeping arrangements make it a wholesome place in which to live and to work. Informality

in the arrangement of pupils' and teacher's desks gives a welcome sense of relief. Scientific consideration has also been given to matters of lighting, heating and ventilation.

In this well-ordered classroom, mental hygiene is considered equally as important as physical health. Security, cooperation, adjustment and confidence on the part of pupils are thought of as definite assets to achievement. The teacher assumes his guidance responsibilities without permitting these to become burdensome or mechanical. He capitalizes upon individual and group interests as a part of diagnosis of difficult problems in the lives of children.

The reader may remark that the writer is describing solely the possibilities of the elementary classroom. On the contrary, nothing has been said that does not apply equally to the high school.

Will the readers travel with the writer into several actual classroom situations? Let us consider ourselves members of a visiting committee whose objective is to observe instruction.

Programs to Meet Children's Needs

At Clinton School, in North Carolina, members of our committee are

welcomed by the principal. She describes efforts being made by the staff to meet more adequately the needs of children. In the discussion which follows, realistic ways of making the school and community interdependent are explored and evaluated. Answers to our questions reveal that students in this school are participating in responsible leadership.

The principal knows the social living theme in each of the eight classrooms. Immediately, we ask how she becomes so familiar with what is going on in the different classes. However, once committee members enter the classrooms, they begin to understand the principal's familiarity with these programs of learning. Each situation reflects the kinds of problems being solved by the children with the guidance and help of the teacher. In one room the children and teacher are making an inventory of the occupations of the adult members of their families. In another, the children are describing their recent visit to a farm, and how the strawberry grower came to talk with them about his work. Here was ample evidence that life in the community was being explored and interpreted, with the probability of its long-range improvement through increased understanding and participation.

The high school classes of Miss X and Mrs. Y, in Alamance County, North Carolina, specialize in social studies and in mathematics, respectively. "Here are two classrooms," says the director of instruction, "in which theory and practice meet." Within a few days after a problem has been identified and pertinent information

secured, it is easy for a visitor to walk into either room and be made consciously aware of the current center of interest. This is reflected in the program and in the expression of the students. The problem in mathematics may be that of designing church windows or of planning decorations for the home. The problem in social studies may be a study of housing, or of the interdependence of community workers. Among other materials of instruction in use will likely be found various kinds of visual aids. In such a wholesome atmosphere, the trained school person will recognize that meaningful and purposeful learning and living are taking place.

In the Altamahaw School, in Alamance County, North Carolina, the sixth-grade teacher encourages students to read the daily newspaper and to bring interesting articles for display on the bulletin board. Once each week they spend considerable time discussing together the articles found in the *Weekly Reader*. Students share news reported by their favorite news reporter. Often this discussion leads to the location and study of new and unfamiliar places on the map. It sometimes provokes further seeking after information. Often, too, national and international problems are discussed with a high level of interest and participation.

How is instruction of such quality achieved? First, the teacher believes thoroughly in the ability and capacity of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds to discuss and evaluate world events, once they are given a background of information and confidence in their own powers of understanding. Second, the



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teacher is thoroughly familiar with the events of the day. Only thus can the teacher give constant support, encouragement, needed information and guidance to such a group of eager youngsters.

Invitation to Good Teaching

Miss A and Mrs. B teach in the elementary schools of Athens, Georgia. Each, in her own way, leads boys and girls into planning activities that make for more intelligent use of the natural and human resources of the community. Both serve as supervisors of apprentice teachers from the University of Georgia. They feel a strong responsibility for providing the kind of working atmosphere which is most conducive to a high quality of learning.

They believe that classroom surroundings are as important to the pre-service teachers as they are to the pupils. A student teacher could hardly fail to note the invitation to good teaching which is evident in such classrooms.

Can a first-grade teacher ever relax enough to sleep during her children's rest period? Indeed, this occasionally happens in the Goshen School, located in Pike County, Alabama. When the children return from lunch, they sit on the floor in a group to hear a well-read story or poem. Often, there is quiet music. Soon the pupils are ready to spread their mats. On one occasion when the principal opened the door, the teacher as well as the children were fast asleep. Such a relaxed atmosphere is truly an environmental factor which

influences the lives of twenty-five six-year-olds. These first-grade boys and girls arise at a very early hour each morning to catch the school bus. When their daily rest period is not provided, an atmosphere of fatigue and disquiet prevails for the afternoon.

Supervisors at Curry, the laboratory school at Woman's College, University of North Carolina, believe one of their chief functions to be that of helping prospective teachers to understand the importance of a wholesome learning environment. Much time is spent in helping these students gain a better understanding of principles of mental hygiene, social living and human relations. This is largely accomplished through their own efforts as they work directly with children. Centers of interest are developed which encourage wholesome group work and which readily show objective evidence of good group living and learning. Here, not only do the classroom programs of both elementary and high school provide good learning environments but the many co-curricular activities extend and improve the total program for meeting needs of children and youth.

Provision for Continuous Learning

That prospective teachers are often extremely sensitive to the total environment of the classroom is indicated in the following statements by two senior students in the College of Education at the University of Georgia:

- A good classroom atmosphere is more than the properties of lighting, heating and ventilation. A good atmosphere is attained when the teacher has a stimulating personal-

ity; when there is good teacher-pupil relationship; when there are democratic ways of planning and doing; and when the children feel secure. A spirit of cooperation, a resourceful teacher, an **enthusiastic** attitude on the part of teacher and pupils, and colorful surroundings influence the quality of learning.

- Important, too, is the emotional factor involved in the classroom. Each child must feel that he belongs to the group. We try to give children as much freedom as possible, and we encourage them to share their experiences. In this way they grow socially and emotionally. Each child finds many opportunities for creative and aesthetic experiences, including those of art and music and of speaking. In our class we feel there is provision for continuous learning as the children attack common problems and work together toward their solution.

Both these statements come from student teachers who have had actual experience in working with children.

Child's Responses to Classroom Atmosphere

How does a child respond to classroom atmosphere? Sam, a seventh-grader, had been classified as a "slow learner." His sixth-grade teacher had warned the two seventh-grade teachers that one of them was going to be extremely unfortunate in having to enroll this boy.

After Sam had experienced considerable difficulty in Mr. X's room in which drill and memorization were enforced, the principal decided to take a chance on transferring the boy to Mrs. Y's

room. Both the teachers agreed to this arrangement. When the transfer had been made, Miss Y worked out with the principal and the boy's parents an approach which they believed would help the child with his problems of adjustment.

It was not difficult for the principal to convince the boy that he might like school better if he worked with the group in Miss Y's room. He responded immediately to the challenge of a classroom which provided industrial arts supplies, simple science equipment and many opportunities to make use of such materials.

At the end of the first day, Sam stopped by the principal's office to relate the day's happenings. As he expressed it, "Teacher helped me and another boy begin building a bird house today. You know, that teacher doesn't make you sit in one place all the time either."

Sam's parents, who had known and understood the reasons for the boy's change of classrooms, visited the school at the end of the second week. Eagerly they told the principal how Sam had now begun to listen carefully to the radio newscast at night because his new teacher helped the children discuss broadcasts they had heard. Also, they had found that Sam was now spelling new words and doing some arithmetic in connection with his bird-house project. Over a period of time, and with a change in classroom settings, another "slow learner" was being rehabilitated.

The teacher who possesses attributes for working well with people and who has an adequate background of preparation, can never be satisfied with anything short of a wholesome learning environment for students. This is the kind of teacher who believes in cooperative curriculum planning and in teaching procedures set up in accordance with a broader concept of method.

The teacher sometimes can do little to change the location and size of his classroom, the windows, closet space and the like. But always he can work to achieve better and more functional utilization of the space and facilities which he has. Such efforts can result in direct, continuing and related experiences which help to arouse interest, encourage initiative and create opportunities for purposeful learning by children.

The teacher's actions often speak louder than words. If he demonstrates genuinely that he enjoys his students, if he helps each one succeed with something each day, and if a good group spirit is encouraged, his educational philosophy is a definite and helpful part of the learning situation.

The wholesome classroom provides for good living each school day. Everything that touches the student as he lives a school day of six hours may influence his physical, mental, social, cultural and spiritual well-being. The good teacher feels the impact of this challenge and plans to meet it with intelligence, courage and sensitive understanding.

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