

Starting A Motor

WE TEACHERS sometimes feel like the starter of an automobile. We grind along, pushing the big classroom engine, day after day, when suddenly for ten minutes, or an hour, or for several days or longer the class comes alive and drives ahead under its own power. Then, too often, the motor dies again, or sputters along with little power.

When children are going strong, they read omnivorously, five or six times as much as when they are plodding along the usual trails. They work on their own after school and on week ends. They seem to have unlimited energy as they enlist playmates, siblings, parents and anyone else they can commandeer to help do the job. A teacher can leave the room without chalk beginning to fly; everyone is too busy on important tasks. We wonder how we can help this magic state of affairs to become the normal everyday pattern of operation.

We know that behavior is caused, that there are reasons underlying the actions of all people. We have had considerable success in using this understanding when things go wrong. We employ the case study approach, for example, to discover why a given child cannot read or why he displays emotional disturbances. We can equally well use this same understanding to discover why things go right. What makes our motor start running well? Two major leads have been appearing from diverse areas of action research.

One lead comes from certain aspects of group process with some of our most

significant investigation carried on in industry. Rather classic examples were the Western Electric studies of pre-World War II. In one experiment an effort was made to identify the factors making for good working conditions. A half-dozen young women assembling telephone relays were selected as a team of guinea pigs. Under each improvement—better lighting, more pay, mid-morning snacks, hourly rest periods, personal counseling service, etc.—production went up. Then as a check conditions were returned to the original starting point and to the consternation of many, production rose once again. Apparently the factor of greatest importance was not the external environment, but the fact that they had become a team singled out for attention. They were consulted frequently, helped make decisions, and felt recognized and important. Even a pay reduction did not decrease production.

In the same company a group of fourteen men spontaneously formed a team of surprising strength. Despite a system of incentive pay they held production to a low level, squelching any member that might overproduce. They could have made more money working as lone individuals but were happier as a group. These two experiences flatly contradict traditional assumptions. An informal group can cause production to soar or can hold it down. Cooperation and the approval of one's fellows appear to be more potent incentives than individual competition and indi-

vidual earnings since man is primarily a social animal. If money is a weak incentive for adults we may well re-examine marks as incentive for children.

During World War II a Midwestern factory built an efficient new plant and transferred to it their management and engineering personnel. For each new order they would plan for most efficient operation. Under emergency stress, specifications without recommendations were sometimes sent to the old and obsolete plant where there were only the routine managers and straw bosses. Surprisingly, the old plant often got into production quicker and produced more efficiently. Investigation revealed that the bosses would immediately confer informally to select the part that each might tackle, then each would assemble his crew to figure out together how their group might best do the job. With this team spirit, the intelligence of all, not just the few, was being focused upon the problem.

Soon after World War II a New England tool factory was plagued with strikes, high production costs and slackened orders. They, too, tried democratic participation with startling results. A long weekly round-table discussion among representatives of workers, management, engineers and sales personnel now considers all ideas with no holds barred. Minutes of each meeting go back to the rank and file for further discussion and to stimulate more ideas. All money saved by reducing the ratio of labor cost to the total production value is distributed among all the workers. The group energy and intelligence released have created more and better ideas than could ever come from one person alone. A company that was struggling to survive soon became one of the best producers in the country. Our schools can use this kind of dynamic process.

Learning from Community Schools

Release of group energy by democratic participation, however, is only a part of the answer. Equally important is the feeling of doing things that are obviously worth doing. Children are most likely to come alive when teachers are leading them in an attack on problems that are important not only to themselves but to their parents and to other members of the community. This is the educational pattern in a school-centered community.

This idea of solving community problems through the schools has been carried forward here and there throughout America: Elsie Clapp and her schools in West Virginia; the work in improving the food, clothing and housing of communities stimulated by the Sloan Foundation in Kentucky, Florida and New England; spots in the South where a school has organized a canning plant for the community, or has helped to modify agricultural practices. But perhaps the most dynamic progress is occurring where the idea has been transplanted to foreign lands. In parts of the Philippine Islands, Latin America and Greece some schools have been consciously used by their communities to better themselves. Children focus their study upon the real needs not only of the immediate community, but of the region, nation and world community. They are working upon things so obviously important that their elders begin to participate and a high energy level is released. Communities lift themselves by their bootstraps and children progress at a maximum pace. When these two factors of team spirit and high purpose are right, the classroom motor really purrs.

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