

# Community: Living Laboratory



WARREN NELSON

What use does the school make of the varied community resources available? Is there free exchange of ideas and understanding between school and industry, between school and commercial establishments?

**T**HE STUDENT made a third unsuccessful try at the controls of the miniature crane used for training crane operators at the Armco steel mills. . . . "But it looked so easy," he said, "when that fellow out in the mill tossed those ten ton ingots around." In a matter of minutes a new appreciation had been developed for the skill and precision needed in industrial work. A few minutes later in the research lab one could see and feel the excitement of discovery as the small group of students twisted test strips of enameled

steel, and realized that science mysteries still lie ahead, ready for someone to solve.

Young people were profiting from the desire of the leaders in this Midwestern steel company to learn more about education—and specifically, how they might help young people get a richer school experience through use of community resources. These steelmen were serving as guinea pigs. They and the teachers were trying to improve the work of the school, giving students an opportunity to be a part of community life rather than depending solely upon classroom descriptions, which all too frequently lose the human touch. Both groups, steelmen

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and teachers, were making school-community cooperation a reality rather than an empty slogan. Management had invited teachers and students to search in mill and office for the experiences which would give an understanding of the work of the community. People in industry studied school programs so that they might understand how their work could be related to the problems of young people.

The average school makes only a token use of the educational resources available in the community. An "American Way" tour in which students are taken through a factory en masse, seeing only the machinery and getting almost no understanding of the organization of people responsible for the operations, is a typical activity, "fulfilling" the school's responsibility to "know" the industry of the community.

Students approaching the time when they leave high school for work frequently have less school experience and contact with the economic base of the community than the beginning student in elementary grades. The elementary school typically provides a number of experiences to acquaint children with the working world around them which provides goods and services. But later on as high school seniors, their major contact with work and life in the community may be the Career Day which in too many cases is the token bow to the new god, Guidance, which has been added to the row on the educational altar.

### **Actual Enterprises Needed**

All phases of teaching which are developed around the major problems

of living need actual enterprises to observe as part of the learning experience. Industry, referring to the whole world of work and production, offers easily available "living laboratories" to be used as case studies of the community's resources and needs. The ability to use these and to appreciate the manifold possibilities of the community's resources is an art that must be developed by active experience, just as the master craftsman gains his artistic ability in creating a fine piece of work by long practice as well as by study. That is where "guinea pigs" in the community are needed — people who are interested in education and willing to learn, along with the teachers, the opportunities and methods of bringing students an understanding of the work which is the lifeblood of the community and the relationships of the individuals who make up the community organizations.

Teachers in every community need to develop an understanding of the depths of experience possible in industry. This method is in contrast to the traditional "plant tour" which may give a view of machinery and technical processes, but which usually results in little understanding of the people who man, plan and manage the machines. It is in this area that the vital research must be done.

If teachers will inquire, people can be found in every community who will be willing to engage in the joint learning activities necessary for schools and communities working together. Industry's keen interest in schools typifies the opportunity to put to constructive use human energy and talents which now are wasted or diverted into activ-

ities less helpful or even injurious to the school. Given some guidance regarding the schools' interest and the needs of youth, people from the community will amaze the teacher with the practical suggestions for learning experiences which were outside the teacher's previous experience.

The needs of youth—to develop salable skills, to understand the rights and duties of citizens, to understand the methods of science, to develop respect for other persons, to purchase and use goods and services intelligently—must be the sound basis for any search for community resources for education. If these imperative needs are accepted as the basis for experiences, then there is little danger of creating bias in the curriculum as teachers start work with only a segment of the community.

The "guinea pig idea" is recommended that more than casual experience may be obtained. Understanding of the school program is not gained overnight. Use of community resources is dependent on the participating members of the community who are learning what is involved in providing realistic experiences for young people. By developing teams of teachers and people from a single organization, the pioneer work can be pushed with a few units from the community, then the lessons applied to the rest.

### **An Experiment in Learning**

To be successful such a program must be approached by both teachers and community people as an experiment in learning. Members of each group will want to recognize that they have no certain answers. They will

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want to "make haste slowly," constantly checking back to their educational objectives to make certain that activities are in keeping with school purposes. Otherwise there is a danger of simply substituting a great deal of factual material about the community for the present text material. This does not make for a community-centered school in the true sense of the term. It may rather develop a provincialism and result in students' being even less prepared to deal with the problems of society. The concentration on one or a few community organizations in the beginning must rather be like Henri Fabre's concentration on a square yard of garden in his study of insects; thorough understanding of a specific case in order that the lessons might be applied to a much wider sphere.

A premature attempt to produce

printed materials is a major danger to guard against. Teachers are probably most guilty of short-circuiting the search for activities and experiences by wanting to formalize the experiences into written material before they have tested these in service. Or teachers may frequently ask for printed materials or pictures of something which might as easily and no doubt more profitably be observed at firsthand in their own community. This is much like the person who looked at the picture postcards of "Old Faithful" rather than walk around the corner of his vacation hotel to see it at firsthand. He was more concerned with miles covered in a journey than with the wealth of experience obtainable.

Teachers want to develop respect for other persons and an appreciation of their work. Part of this is appreciation of the common, daily work of the world as well as an appreciation of the great music, writings and works of art. Let the student (or teacher) take the place at the workbench of the girl who is (seemingly) so easily and effortlessly assembling gauges. It is apparently unskilled work, but five minutes at the bench trying to duplicate the task will give an appreciation of the skill, efficiency and dexterity of movement that no pamphlet or movie of the process could ever convey. The teacher or student trying his hand at forming a lump of clay on the potter's wheel in the factory where his dishes are made will have a new appreciation of art in daily life.

These are only samples of the activities which can put life and meaning into the field trip which is too often only a day's respite from the classroom.

Possibly we as teachers have some responsibility for the tendency to look down at labor and at some business activities because so few of us have ever experienced the satisfaction of doing skilled work and of realizing the science and art that can go into such daily work as that of the craneman who places a ten ton ingot on a stand as gently as one places a cup on a shelf.

Industry, used to advertising and production schedules, is frequently only too glad to produce printed materials and consider its obligation to education fulfilled. Much more work and effort are required for the experiences in which teachers and students actually get behind the scenes and gain the understanding of how people work together and feel some of the problems they encounter.

A moratorium on materials might be one of the first operating principles of a sincere attempt in school-community cooperation in order to develop the best of the experiences available.

Research is a necessity for improved school instruction. Results in this action research are many. They include new friendships and new interests for the teacher as he finds a wealth of instructional ideas and opportunities previously undreamed of. This is accompanied by the greater satisfaction in work as he sees the heightened interest of students. Last but not least is the increased understanding and support of the community as men and women work with teachers toward a common goal, providing richer educational opportunities and better preparing young people for life and citizenship.

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