

A Program in Family Living

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In a common learnings program, pupils in an Alabama high school study family living, a topic of immediate concern to youth.

THE CENTRAL SCHOOL, located in the heart of the Tennessee Valley Area about eleven miles northwest of Florence, Alabama, is a rural, consolidated school with an enrollment of approximately 750 students, grades one to twelve.

For several years the daily schedule in this school has been organized so that all high school students have a two-hour core period with about twenty-five to thirty students in each section. According to the *Alabama Course of Study*, the core curriculum consists of "those basic socializing experiences which all youth should have as a part of their school life." It is sometimes spoken of as the "common learnings" part of the school program, and its chief purpose is education for democratic living or education for citizenship. The content is designed to meet the needs of youth and is based upon their interests, needs, abilities and past experiences.

There is no official, specially-trained guidance director in this school. The core teacher, with this larger block of time, serves as guidance counselor to all students of a particular grade, though the other classroom teachers share this responsibility.

During no other period of the growth and development of an individual are there so many doubts and indecisions as during the adolescent years, and at

no other time is there a greater need for guidance in facing the uncertainties of the present and the future. Since one of the most disturbing factors in the lives of this age group is their interest in the opposite sex and the realization that in the very near future they will be establishing homes of their own, a unit on Marriage and the Family, a topic of vital interest to them at this time, has been developed.

Some years ago such a course may not have been so important, but young people today are living under conditions quite unlike those their parents knew when they were young. Because the unity of the home is threatened today by so many conflicting forces, education for family living has become increasingly necessary as a part of youth's training.

This unit, as well as other units, is usually scheduled near the beginning of the term when the class is making plans for its year's work. During this time students and teacher work together setting up goals for the year and agreeing upon criteria to be used in the selection of problems. The teacher keeps in mind the school's philosophy and objectives and his over-all responsibility for the guidance of this group. Care is also taken to avoid duplication

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of work done in home economics and other classes.

Near the beginning of this study, the teacher and the pupils cooperatively work out a list of suggested problems and sub-problems, which naturally vary from class to class and from year to year. This is done by writing questions of all kinds on the blackboard. Putting these on the board seems to provide a "focus for group thinking" and tends to help the group identify problems of which they previously may not have been aware. Later, after every pupil has had an opportunity to contribute to the list, these questions are put into the hands of a planning committee. This committee studies the questions and with the help of the teacher or student teacher organizes them into more logical divisions. Often the organization is planned by the whole class, in order to give everyone experience in outlining. The questions are classified under such headings as dating, courtship, engagement, meaning of marriage, marriage laws and customs, financial problems, parenthood and factors in a successful marriage.

In the meantime a committee is at work locating all the available materials on the subject. Books are borrowed from the public library and the bookmobile, the college library, and classroom libraries, and these are placed in the core classrooms. As much new material as can be afforded is purchased each year.

After the outline is accepted, the students are given an opportunity to select a topic for individual study, and groups are formed accordingly. There follows a period of individual research

and study as well as some group work. The pupils are encouraged to read from as many sources as possible. They are given help in note taking and are shown how to make a bibliography. Each group shares with the rest of the class the knowledge it has gained. A group report may be done in various ways; for example, some groups use panel or round table discussions; others may present a play or radio skit.

A Cooperative Approach

Pupil-teacher planning is most effective when the teacher believes that the pupils have the ability to plan and then create situations in which they will be stimulated to think and willing to express their ideas without fear of being unduly criticized or ridiculed, for pupils at this age are very sensitive to the opinions of their classmates. Therefore, the unit usually begins with an aspect of the problem that has meaning and significance to them or one that is of current concern. For example, the unit on Marriage and the Family sometimes begins with a discussion of questions concerning boy-girl relationships or conflicts with parents over such things as the use of the family car, friends, late hours, rivalry with brothers and sisters or other causes of family irritations.

Allowing different pupils to preside during discussion periods is another way of getting pupils to participate. Not only does this help the one who presides to gain poise, self-confidence and practice in oral expression, but those in the audience seem to find it easier to take part. Tensions are relieved somewhat, and they seem more willing to express their ideas than when

the teacher presides. The teacher, of course, does not become an outsider. Rather, as a member of the group he, too, may offer suggestions—topics that otherwise might be overlooked. In this way he has a better opportunity of becoming a counsellor-teacher.

Students are encouraged to express their ideas as clearly as possible. In the early stages, when they still may be unsure of themselves because they are not too well acquainted with the teacher and with each other, some weaknesses are overlooked and much encouragement is given.

In order for a teacher to be a successful guide, he must know as much as possible about the students under his supervision. Therefore, he studies each pupil so that he will be fully aware of the possibilities and limitations of this particular individual. Only then is he able to adjust the experiences to meet the pupil's particular needs. One way of providing for individual differences is to see that a variety of learning materials is available for the development of the problem. The Life Adjustment Booklets, published by the Science Research Associates, Chicago, furnish easy reading material for the slower readers. Those especially suitable for this unit are *Dating Days*, *Understanding Yourself*, *Getting Along with Others*, *Understanding Sex*, *How to Get Along with Parents*, and *Looking Ahead to Marriage*. Available also are many other inexpensive pamphlets. Among these are the Public Affairs Pamphlets, such as *Keeping Up with Teen-Agers*, *Building a Successful Marriage*, and *Broken Homes*.

There are numerous other ways to provide for individual differences. Not

all pupils become good leaders but good followers are needed, too. Creative talents of the group are discovered and may be utilized for various activities. For instance, those with artistic ability collect and arrange an attractive bulletin board display. Others may be interested in dramatization. Skits, sociodramas or role playing are used for topics covering situations such as "A Scene at the Dinner Table," "Who Will Have the Car Tonight," or "Who Wore My New Dress (or Tie)."

Effective Techniques

As great a variety of techniques as possible has been used in developing this unit. Some that have proved most effective are described below.

One of the most impressive dramatizations used in this unit was a mock church wedding in suitable costumes and with simple decorations. A simple church wedding ceremony with ushers, bridesmaids, traditional wedding marches and appropriate solos, was presented in the auditorium by the pupils of one section with other sections as invited guests. Invitations were written and sent to all guests. Visiting parents were used as mothers of the bride and groom and were ushered in in correct fashion. The whole atmosphere was one of dignity and solemnity. This type of activity calls for a variety of talents and is particularly good for rural groups, many members of which may not have attended a church wedding. As a result of this activity, one member of the class who married soon after the close of school, did have a small rural church wedding in her community. It is hoped that others will follow this example rather than the

common practice of running off to a town in a neighboring state to be married in haste by a stranger. One of the purposes of this unit is to give an appreciation for the sacredness of the marriage vows and a greater understanding of the responsibilities of married life.

A panel or a round table discussion on a specific subject such as "Desirable Characteristics in a Mate" or "Standards of Conduct for Dating and Courtship" encourages a vast amount of research, for a panel must be based on authoritative information. When students are able to read material and interpret it correctly in *their own words* instead of merely repeating meaningless statements that are memorized, sometimes incorrectly, then learning becomes worth while.

In one such panel, the entire audience began participating ahead of time—before either the teacher or the student teacher realized what actually was happening. Even though rules of presenting a panel were not followed to the letter, value was gained because participation was lively and spontaneous. Free exchange of ideas and varying points of view were expressed rather than having merely a question and answer session between the leader and the members of the panel as so often happens when the subject is less interesting.

Visiting speakers who are specialists on certain subjects have been used to great advantage in this unit. The following are suggestive of some of the community resources that have been used. A physician was invited to talk about the "Importance of Pre-Marital Physical Examinations," a judge explained the "Legal Aspects of Marriage

and Divorce" in language that all could understand; a psychologist and a sociologist from the nearby teachers college came to speak on the "Effect of Personality on a Successful Marriage" and "Expectations in Marriage" and a minister spoke on "Establishing a Christian Home."

Films furnish another excellent source of teaching material and have been used to some extent and with effectiveness. Several textbooks on Marriage and the Family give helpful annotated lists of suitable films while a mimeographed list of free films on some phases of this topic may be obtained from various sources.

One of the most interesting ways of enriching the unit is through the reading of good literature. A list of novels, short stories and poems dealing with some of these problems in family relationships may be found in the appendix of the text, *You and Your Family*, by Moore and Leahy. Articles in current magazines and the reading of plays furnish supplementary reading materials that are used to help meet individual differences. Appropriate Bible readings and songs provide variety in the daily program. Authentic material on sex education is made available. Parents in the community have shown an interest in this unit and have, on several occasions, asked for material for their teen-age children to read.

The teacher's chief role in this study has been that of determining individual and group needs, guiding group planning, guiding the activities of the group and helping students evaluate their progress from time to time. Evaluation has been based as much as possible on the changed behavior of the pupils.

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