

# Reflections of a Sixth Grade

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After living and working together during a full school year, boys and girls in a sixth grade decide to make a joint report to their parents. Their letter is given in this article.

**T**O LIVE well during any period on earth has demanded courage, clear thinking and enlightened vision. We believe these qualities are needed today more than ever before. If we are teachers of eleven- and twelve-year-olds, we frequently ask ourselves how we can plan so that children will develop the self-confidence necessary for the courageous; an intellectual curiosity important for clear thinking; and an understanding of concepts essential for enlightened vision.

There is no list of minimum essentials that we can pick out of a course of study which will help us answer this question. We believe, however, that the way we teach is important in our answer to it. A page-by-page assignment from one textbook, no matter how interestingly it is written, can do little more than precipitate the constant query, "Is *this* what you want me to do?"

Group formulation of purposes will often lead to the creative thinking that questions irresponsible judgments, that challenges prejudices, that denies acceptance of demagogic beliefs. In order to develop convictions which are based on dedication to democratic principles and which lead to enlightened vision, children must have a variety of materials with which to work; they must have contacts with people who have had meaningful ex-

periences; they need to work with teachers who are sensitive to and informed on public affairs, teachers who believe in building concepts rather than in stressing memorization of facts. It is through thoughtful discussion that ideas are clarified, that word meanings are strengthened, and that group unity is built.

## Children Reveal Their Feelings

Those of us who work with preadolescents are often apt to find our own reactions as turbulent as those of the children. We are discouraged, then elated. We are frightened, then courageous. We are timid, then confident. We are accusing, then trusting. We are tense, then relaxed. We are unimaginative, then creative. We compromise, then stand firm. So it is with the children's feelings. They frequently reach new heights and new depths in terms of what the present experience does to their ideas about themselves.

Told that their work looks like that of kindergartners, or that they are the worst children you've ever seen: they become inwardly bitter and rebellious. Told that they are contributing to the school by being conscientious in safety work, in looking after the nursery children, reading to the third grade, being responsible for the Book Fair, putting out the school newspaper: their backs straighten, their heads lift high, and

there comes a nobility of character found only in the serene self-respecting. Told that they must write a story no matter about what: their papers are empty or there is dull narration of uninteresting details. Told that their beginning sentences are beautiful or exciting: their work takes on epic quality. Told that it is thrilling to work with people who really enjoy taking hold of a problem and giving creative solutions to that problem, whether it be of international, national or group importance: they smile with grateful humility and become increasingly sensitive. We use what we know to be best for developing strong persons and we succeed. We disregard what we know and we fail. Because children are people, too, they are susceptible to the same things that motivate us.

Children's reflections on their own behavior and accomplishment reveal those influences that have been truly helpful to them. A sixth grade made such an evaluation as part of its annual letter to parents. The children were enthusiastic in their acceptance of this challenge. Each child chose to write about the area which held most interest for him. The various interest groups presented their findings so that a composite letter might be written. Each piece of writing was examined critically. Discussions were held regarding the authenticity and quality of work. For example, there was the matter of Bill's poem, "What Is a City?" Many children liked this bit of writing, but there was also strong feeling against including it in their letter. Mary said that their parents wouldn't believe any one of them had written it because the words sounded

so big. Bill didn't feel bad when the group decided to have Stephanie and Sally help him rewrite it.

The children were exacting about their writing, but they agreed that the following letter was a good appraisal of their thoughts and work during their sixth grade year.

Sixth Grade Room  
Campus School  
June 4, 1953

Dear Mom and Dad:

We, of the sixth grade, have decided to write a letter explaining our activities this year. This report is compiled by the members of our class and it ranges from the study of Africa to arithmetic!

We now realize that we will be the citizens and leaders of tomorrow and it will be our duty to defend freedom. So in social studies we set out to study democracy, the very word that means so much to us. We decided that democracy has many meanings. It means freedom, yes, but freedom plus responsibility, and government by the people. On these beliefs we based our study. Some of the most important points that we discovered were needed to keep a democracy were:

1. To learn the facts before you speak.
2. To watch out for prejudice. Judge the individual by what he does, not by his race or creed.
3. To put yourself in another person's place.
4. To realize that people are more

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alike than different, but that differences in people are to be respected and not laughed at.

5. To understand that all parts of the world are interdependent.

6. To accept responsibility. We must not try to get out of doing something.

7. To realize that our world is constantly changing.

After we had discussed the meaning of democracy for several weeks, we studied the agencies of the United Nations, because we wanted to know what was being done to build a peaceful world. Then we went to the countries in the UN and studied some of them so that we might understand people throughout the world. The African continent was the first place we tried to learn more about. You may remember that last fall there was a lot in the papers about the trouble in the Union of South Africa, Kenya, Egypt and Algiers. Since these were trouble spots we needed to study them. We split up into committees and took different parts of the continent, dividing our topics into British possessions, French possessions, Belgian possessions, and independent countries. We gave reports after we had gathered our information. We paid particular attention to the problems of the people.

When we went to St. Mary's Lake we had an "Inter-American Conference," which met in 1953 at Caracas, Venezuela. So St. Mary's Lake became Caracas, Venezuela! The conference meets every five years and sets policies for the Organization of American States. Then there is also a Council of the Organization of American States which meets twice a month at the Pan

American Union Building in Washington, D. C. When we got back to school we had the council meet in our classroom. Now we have had about ten meetings. There are twenty-one American republics represented. The representatives are called ambassadors. We pretended we were ambassadors. At our council meetings we discussed such problems as agriculture, education, living conditions in the cities, health and housing, transportation, and government. Each one of us had a certain country to study. We started our meetings with a prayer, followed by a roll call of the republics. The secretary presented the problem we were to discuss, then each country reported on the particular topic. The most interesting part of the meeting was the time when we tried to take action on the problems or decide how a problem was to be solved.

Everyone felt that by having these council meetings we could learn to put ourselves in the other person's place and find out about other countries' problems. We tried to remember that if "one nation is oppressed, then we all are oppressed." This way of working really helped us a lot. We have had fun in social studies and almost everyone enjoyed it. If we remember these important ideas that we have learned this year and if we put them into practice, we will have a wonderful world. If we don't, the world of the future will be like it is today.

During the whole school year, we depended on many different people for information on certain topics. At the first of the year, Mayor Allen talked to us about how democracy works in Kalamazoo. He explained about the

responsibilities of a city commissioner. We were convinced from his talk that democracy is practiced in our town. We depended very much on the foreign students in the college. Since our main goal was to help promote world peace by understanding other people, we began studying, as a group, other countries. We had students from Austria, Latvia, the Gold Coast, Finland and Holland. Dr. Seibert talked to us about his visit to England. He told us that it was a stereotype that the English never laugh. He also pointed out how much alike we are. A few weeks ago Mrs. Reid came to visit us. She is a social worker and she explained just what the social worker does. There are two main branches of social workers—the international workers who help the refugees and people overseas, and the social workers who help people right in our own community. Another one of our resource people was Dr. Coggan. He told us the proper ways to care for our teeth. We all agreed that his talk was very interesting. Dr. Thea, director of the Constance Brown Society for the hard of hearing, told us about the proper care of our ears. He brought with him a deaf boy from the Upjohn school and demonstrated how to work with a person who has never heard any sounds. Mr. Yntema, who has been appointed on a committee by Governor Williams, talked to us about migrant workers. We believe that migrant workers' children should be educated and that better housing should be provided. Mr. Hawkins told us about his interest in television when we were studying it in science. We would like to thank all these wonderful people for helping us so much.

In our work we have come across many words that have been explained to us. We learned their meaning. Most of our words have come in social studies so these words have helped us become acquainted with more and different places and people in the world. These are some of the words: interdependence, democracy, illiteracy, stereotype, Pan-American, international, prejudice, segregation, conservation, cooperatives, fazenda, hacienda, estancia, adobe, pampas, migrants, sharecroppers, subsistence farming, constitution, charter, imperialism, monsoon, fjord, oasis, monarch, autocracy, commonwealth, dominion. When the people in our generation come to govern the United States then we will be able to understand other people and in that way promote a more peaceful, freedom-loving world.

Some wonder why we studied famous people. We studied about them so we would know and understand them and their countries. It is important to understand their troubles, not just ours. These are some of the great men and women we read about: Ralph Bunche, David Livingston, Disraeli, Gladstone, Christopher Wren, Queen Victoria, Charles Dickens, Winston Churchill, Freidjof Nansen, Gandhi, Nehru, Simon Bolivar, San Martin, Juarez. As you can see, some of them lived long ago. Others are living today.

In our Health Club we have had three panel discussions on problems of getting along with others. One was called, "How can we be better liked?" In answer to the question, these replies were given: Be a good sport and be able to give and take. If someone gets a chance to do something that you

had wished to do, don't get mad and take it out on someone else. Just remember, there's always another chance. We decided there are many causes of misbehavior. We suggested that maybe a person doesn't have many friends or maybe no one ever says anything good about him. Possibly he wants to get attention so that he can become popular. Whatever it is that happens, there's always a reason for it. We came to the conclusion that such popularity isn't important. It is very important to be well-liked and to have friends and if you have both of these things you will be popular. We said that everyone should have certain goals that he should set up to achieve. We told ourselves to remember that no one wants to be left out. Every person shouldn't want to be the strongest and best. If we try to think about these things we may be better liked. Everyone felt that these discussions helped us a lot.

Storywriters Club is something everyone enjoys. We like to hear each others' stories and thoughts. We love to write them. Some of the stories we even illustrate. The stories range from hilarious stories, to fairy tales, to true stories. We thought you might like to read what Bill, Stephanie and Sallie wrote about a city:

"A City is a big, noisy, lighted-up machine.

The people in it are the works.

The works run the city.

A city is a place where free enterprise thrives.

A city is a place of contrast.

Some people who live in it are happy.

Some people are sad.

Some are lonely and feel as if no one wants them.

Some are on top of the world.

In some places the big machine is beautiful and sparkles.

In other parts it is horrible:

The slums, Tin-Pan Alley,

It's all the same.

People living with bad conditions all the way around.

Let's call this part of the city the carburetor.

A city symbolizes progress up from the darkness towards the light.

It is the birthplace of ideas and thoughts.

A city is people.

They make it.

If the United States did not have her cities

She would not—could not—survive  
In this world which forgets other countries

As fast as the ocean forgets a drop of water."

We have Storywriters Club once a week. We hope the sixth grade next year has as much fun with it as we have had.

Another one of our clubs is Storytellers Club. The first semester we picked a short story or poem to tell and gave it to the class in the words of the author. The second semester we called Storytellers Club by a new name—Looking Through the Bookshelves. Each week we chose an author and gave book reviews on all the books we could find that the author had written. We have had reviews on the books of Carol Brink, Laura Ingalls Wilder, and John Tunis. We liked the second way of having book reviews better.

Many good books have been introduced to us in literature. One of the best stories we read was *Twenty and*

*Ten*, by Claire Bishop. It is about a group of children in France during World War II. They hid ten Jewish children from the Nazis. The children hid in a cave and finally the Nazis left. They left behind them a large box of oranges and chocolate candy which the children had not seen or ever tasted in years. Another book we enjoyed was *The Very Good Neighbors*, by Irmen-garde Eberle. It was about a Mexican family who came to the United States to live. They were very poor, but managed to build a house out of tin cans, tar paper and little pieces of wood.

We have shared several stories we like by making flannel board pictures. This is a lot of fun. The materials we used were crayons, paper, paste, scissors and outing flannel. All we had to do was to find an interesting book, make pictures that illustrated the story and then paste flannel on the back. We shared our stories with other classes and with other schools.

Sometimes we add to our spelling list words which we need to know how to spell for social studies. We made a spelling chart this year. It is numbered up to thirty-three to represent all the people in the room. On Friday when we have our final test we count everyone who has gotten a perfect score. If eighteen children had a perfect score we would paint a line up to the number eighteen. The highest score we have gotten is twenty-three. We made this chart to help us try harder to get all the words right. We hope we have found good ways for each of us to study in the future. We realize that every person has a different way to study his words that is good for just himself.

We have made many interesting experiments in science. The first of the year we studied elements, but we didn't go into them thoroughly. In the second semester we started to have a better Science Club, thanks to our teacher, Mr. Cook. We studied light, television, sound and conservation.

In math we have accomplished quite a bit. We started with adding, subtracting, multiplying and dividing whole numbers. As the year wore on, we worked more with fractions, mixed fractions and finally decimals. These were processes we hadn't mastered thoroughly. We learned to change decimals into fractions and vice versa. We all have improved greatly since the beginning of the year.

This has been a wonderful year. It went so fast and happily that we didn't even realize we were growing. We think that everyone has improved in self-control, does better thinking, acts more grown up, and treats other people with more respect. We have learned if we want to have friends we can't always be thinking of ourselves.

By visiting other schools and going to camp with the fifth grade we have learned to get along with others. We have learned to listen and concentrate. We have grown in word power, in understanding and in patience. When we first came into the sixth grade we were a bunch of unorganized, uncooperating children. Now we are quieter, we use our heads in an emergency, we put our own ideas down on paper in better form and we respect other people. We believe that during this year we have truly become better citizens!

Love,  
The Sixth Grade

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