



## *Developing Group Unity in a Third Grade*

Laura M. Mixner

How can pupils and teacher work effectively together in creating a feeling of group unity within their classroom? This article describes the efforts of a third grade in developing an atmosphere of mutual respect and helpfulness.

**T**HE first month of school is often a period of adjustment in every classroom. The children are trying to gain a place for themselves in a new situation, for they are meeting many new personalities for the first time. The teacher is becoming acquainted with a new group of children. This may cause feelings of insecurity on the part of some of the children until they can make some sort of adjustment to each other and to the new situation. The kind of adjustment they make and the feeling of satisfaction or dissatisfaction gained may set the tone for the year.

It is important that we do some serious thinking and planning in regard to this area of adjustment.

In our school, the program is so organized that each teacher has the same class for two years, thus giving the children and teacher the benefit of close association. Most of the twenty-six children in our third grade group were unknown to one another, for the second grades in the school had been redivided into four different groups at the end of the past school year.

The children now had many adjustments to make. They must become acquainted with a new teacher; they must also get to know one another. Sometimes their efforts to find a place for themselves in the new situation were helpful to themselves and to the

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group; at other times, they were not. Each individual seemed to be struggling for recognition by the other members of the group. Moreover, there seemed to be little sense of responsibility toward the welfare of others in the room. This attitude was of great concern to the teacher and prompted formulation of the following hypothesis: The third grade pupils will develop a spirit of unity as they plan and work together, evaluating their progress as they go along.

### **Group Relations**

The first discussions in our third grade centered upon our problems in getting along together as a group. It was brought out that we tended to argue too much about almost everything and wanted to have our own way, regardless of the welfare of others. In discussing possible improvements, the children seemed only to suggest meaningless phrases and sentences designed to please the accepted adult standards of proper behavior for children. Their suggestions seemed in almost all cases to stress the negative aspect, such as, "Don't fight with each other," "Keep our hands to ourselves," "Don't be bossy."

It was very difficult to get through these generalities and into their real thinking. The children suggested that they could stop arguing with each other, or that they could stop being bossy. There was, however, no appreciable difference in their general attitude toward each other, nor did they try to live up to any of their own suggestions. It became evident that they did not consider these things to be real problems.

We wanted to see just how the children felt about their group experiences thus far, so that we could know where to begin next time. After explaining the purpose and use of the "Post-Meeting Reaction," we decided to try such a technique of evaluation. The following are the results of the first reactions noted, after we discussed our problems in getting along together:

*How do you think your group worked together today?*

Comments of those who liked their discussions very much:

"I think that our group did well for the first time because we did not interrupt."

"I think our group did fairly good today because our group put our heads together and thought very good and this is what I think."

"It wasn't so good at the beginning, but it was nice at the end because not anybody talked when others were talking."

"It was good for the first time."

"I think it was good."

"Good. I think they acted pretty good."

Comments of those who thought the discussion was so-so:

"I think fair because everyone went to their chair."

"I think it was fair because everyone was laughing."

"I think it was O.K. because they were good."

"I think it was fair because everyone improved and because they answered well."

Comments of those who disliked their group discussions very much:

"I think it was very poor because they were being silly."

"I do not think our group worked very well today because everyone talked at once."

"I do not think it was good because everyone was laughing."

"Poor. Well, some people were silly."

"I think it did not turn out good because another boy and I were talking."

It was easy to see that their feelings were mixed ones. Their suggestions for improvement showed that the children were beginning to sense individual and group responsibilities, but there was an indication that they needed help in pursuing it further. However, it was a beginning. The problem of working together effectively began to have meaning for them.

### **Role of Leadership**

Our next discussions centered upon the role of leadership, for the children needed help in this area if they were to function effectively in their small group or committee work. The children had various ideas of the role of the leader in a given situation. They said he was a "boss," he was "a sort of king," "one who has charge of people." They said that his duties consisted of "telling people what to do," "bossing them," "he has the power to make people do what he says," "he can punish them when they don't do what he says."

In their own experiences this seemed to be their concept of the leadership function—to have charge of a group and to tell them what to do. The things

a leader tells his group to do were very vague in their minds and were always stated in general terms, bearing no relation to their own lives.

In discussing the role of the leader in more definite terms, we related it to their own specific situation. Out of these discussions came definite suggestions for the leader in our small group and committee work, such as seeing that the suggestions of everyone in the group are considered and not just those of the popular people, helping in the organization of the group problem, being careful not to "boss the kids around" and "make them do what he says." He shouldn't "get mad" if the group doesn't want to follow his suggestions.

Group membership and individual responsibility in group situations were discussed to some extent at this time. Their "Post-Meeting Reactions" at this time showed that their suggestions were still stated in general, rather meaningless terms, although they had gotten away somewhat from their negative outlook and were talking about actual situations which had arisen in their groups.

By analyzing together their "Post-Meeting Reactions," we began to note a change in attitude emerging in the group. They were beginning to acquire a better understanding of what it means to work together effectively. This was evidenced by the type of comments now appearing on the PMR's. Their suggestions were more constructive, involving group and individual responsibilities: "Do more thinking." "Try to start thinking about the problem." "I think we can agree better." "Next time we will

know what to do so we will do better." "By thinking more." "Not to argue so much." "By concentrating." "We could improve by not talking so loud."

These comments seem to indicate that some group members were having difficulty in accepting their responsibilities for working cooperatively. It is notable that concrete suggestions for improvement were being offered in specific terms, such as, "not to argue so much," and "by concentrating."

As the children worked together in group situations, they ran up against difficulties which they could not solve alone. As this happened, the particular group involved brought its problem before the class for help. An illustration of this centered around one group having a great deal of trouble in getting its members to pay attention to each other during its discussions. The leader said that the group members would not cooperate with him. How could he get them to cooperate? One member suggested that the group might be bored with the problem under discussion. Another child asked the leader what he should do when a group wouldn't listen to him. The leader said he would tell the group to pay attention. The teacher suggested that we could all understand the situation better if we could see the group in action. The role-playing which followed showed us that the leader was attempting to act as a boss, and this was resented by the group, leading to their general attitude of boredom and lack of attention. The resulting discussion brought out the fact that the leader should consult with the members of the group before making group decisions. Those who had been loafing

agreed to listen to their group discussions and take part in them. The group could then see if the situation was improved. It did improve somewhat, but the leader had a difficult time. He always felt that he knew more than the other children, and he showed them that he felt this way.

### **When Problems Appear**

At this point a problem began to emerge which was of great concern to all—that of an obsessive talker. One child talked so much and so long that it was difficult to make any progress in our discussions. Not only that, but he outtalked anyone who tried to get in and help the situation. The children tried to solve the problem without hurting his feelings, by saying, "It is hard for those with soft voices to get in and say what they want to because some with loud voices talk all the time." This was not effective at all, so one of the boys commented, "I don't want to be unkind, but I think Billy is talking too much. Others can't get into the discussion." Billy remarked that he was doing this because he had "more upstairs." In desperation one child burst out with, "Yes, but it is boring to listen to."

In the discussion following this remark, we brought the whole problem into the open and talked about it. We broke up into small buzz groups to discuss ways of improving the situation, with Billy participating in one of the group discussions. One buzz group suggested that someone might sit next to Billy and tap him lightly on the arm when he talked too often, since he probably didn't realize that he was doing it. Billy agreed to this,

provided they wouldn't tap too hard or too often. Another group said that it had noticed some helpful suggestions being made during our discussions, but that many of these were dropped without anything being done about them. Some of these suggestions might have helped Billy. One girl thought that someone should come to the group with paper and pencil and write down all of the suggestions offered in each discussion and note whether or not these were acted upon. This suggestion was accepted by group consensus. Billy's buzz group had no suggestion to offer, for its members had found little opportunity to talk together about anything.

In later meetings and discussions, we tried out some of the suggestions which had been made in this first session. Billy soon did not need anyone to tap him on the arm, for he became aware of his problem and sincerely tried to overcome it. We also tried keeping a record of ideas and suggestions. This kept the leader aware of suggestions made during discussions.

In order to show Billy graphically how much he was obstructing group discussion, a diagram was made on the board, showing the spread of participation at particular times. Billy said, "I did talk a lot, didn't I? But then I have so many ideas and that's the reason I talk all the time."

I mentioned the fact that I, too, had talked a good deal, but that I was going to try to do better about this. Billy immediately said, "Yes, and I will, too." This seemed to indicate that he saw how he had monopolized the discussion and had simply needed a face-saving device to admit this.

As the year progressed, it was significant that the children's comments on the "Post-Meeting Reactions" were more concerned with the amount of satisfaction gained by progress in solving a problem. Fewer suggestions for future discussions were offered. The last "PMR" taken during the year suggests that there has been considerable growth in group maturity since the beginning of the year.

*How do you think the group worked together today?*

Comments of those who liked the discussion very much:

"Every boy and girl helped out. Some people talked a little more than others, but that was O.K."

"I thought it was excellent because we all chipped in 2¢ and made 54¢ in words. We made good progress. We all worked together."

"I liked the discussion. Everyone had interesting things to talk about."

"We really got somewhere."

"I thought it was good because the group worked well together."

"I thought the discussion was very good because we all tried to solve the problem."

"At all other meetings we did not solve anything. At this meeting we did."

Comments of those who thought the meeting was a pretty good one:

"We made more suggestions."

"We talked some and we didn't sometimes."

"Good because we got somewhere. We were working harder."

"I think that it was a good discussion."

Comments of those who thought the discussion was fair or so-so:

"Fair, though it got somewhere."

"I think that they got along pretty well and did not interrupt too much."

*Do you have any suggestions for future discussions?*

Comments of those who liked the discussion very much:

"Talk sensibly."

"We should not be silly, so we can get more things done."

"We learn by doing, so we should keep it up more. A lot of us talk too much."

Comments of those who thought the discussion was a pretty good one:

"Not to talk so much." "We could be a little quieter."

"Not for certain people to call out."

"I think people should not squirm and wiggle *and butt in*."

"We could learn to talk one at a time and not all talk at once."

Comment of one who thought that he felt so-so about the discussion:

"We could learn to let the people with the low voices talk first."

There were many indications that the children were gaining in ability to work together as a group. Results of their PMR's showed that there was now less emphasis on the punitive type of suggestion for improving a situation and more on working together to achieve some common goal. Proper behavior was no longer the central theme. Working together as a group began to emerge as a point of focus. We began to hear such comments as, "If the group members won't cooperate, we can't get anywhere," or "That

won't solve the problem," or "That won't help them." There were also such comments as, "Everyone was helping," "Things kept going," "We worked hard and thought," indicating a high degree of satisfaction with the group progress at that particular time.

As the year progressed, the children became quite fond of each other. Individuals who went on trips sent back postcards or letters for others in the group. Often they sent back candy or fruit. The children were constantly planning things to do together, both in school and at home. If things went wrong in the classroom, they frequently said, "Don't you think we need to talk together about this?" or "I have a problem to bring before the group." That they were developing a feeling of unity was very evident. Each day produced its own illustrations of growth.

By analyzing their group processes, the children were developing an awareness of each other's point of view, a valuable asset to anyone. Most of all, there was a change in their awareness of each other as individuals with opinions and ideas of their own. They began to realize that each person cannot always have his own way, with no regard for the others involved. They saw that each individual is a person in his own right, with feelings to be considered. By experience, they found out that more can be accomplished by working together effectively as a group than by scattered and unrelated individual effort.

This is an on-going process, since this same group is together a second year. It is very exciting to observe the growth and development of these children.

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