

Working with Educators of Other Countries

How can we give visitors who are school people from other lands more effective contacts with our homes, our culture and especially with our educational institutions?

TO BE TRANSPLANTED at least temporarily to another country halfway round the world from the United States is a healthy experience for any American teacher. A visit to Cambodia,¹ which represents a very different cultural environment from that of our country, caused me to take stock of how we receive educators from abroad. What kinds of programs do we plan *for* and *with* them, how do we interpret our educational beliefs and practices, and how do we help these educators evaluate what they have seen, done, felt and thought about their experiences in the United States?

During the past five years many city schools, county schools, colleges, universities, state departments of education, organizations and agencies have taken responsibility for receiving visitors from abroad. How those responsibilities are carried out may in many instances determine what the visitor thinks about the United States, and how he interprets our country to his family, friends and fellow workers when he returns home.

¹ A trip that involved a 1200-mile journey by station wagon to meet with 1200 elementary school principals in four one-week workshops in four different parts of that country.

How Do We See the Problem?

Wherever we work, we usually assume that educators from other countries are looking at us and at our schools through the same glasses that we ourselves use. A vigorous handshake may put a visitor off balance if he comes from the part of the world where handshaking is not the method of greeting a friend. An English-speaking visitor to the United States was a dinner guest in a private home. He stayed and stayed until a late hour. Afterwards he laughingly chided his hostess for failing to "give the signal" that it was time to go home. What was the signal? In his country it would have been the serving of coffee and sandwiches, even though a substantial dinner was only several hours in the background. The same hostess asked a young man from the Orient whether he was married, did he have children, how old were they? He gently rebuked her by saying, "It is not polite to ask such questions. The answers would reveal my age." In Cam-

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bodia I was asked in the course of a day by members of the workshop group, "What is your age? What salary do you receive?" A friend who had spent a year in that country assured me that both questions were most polite, and I said to myself, "Here the tables are turned."

Where Do We Start?

We as educators need to be ourselves from the point of view of sincerity and warmth of welcome, but at the same time, we need to put ourselves in the place of the visitor in many situations. He has adjustments to make

in time, in place, in food, clothing, and in the very tempo of living. Visitors who travel half the world around have exchanged night for day, and vice versa. It is not easy to modify the habits of a lifetime, and to stay awake when one would normally be sleeping.

Each individual or group member who plans for visitors may well develop some suggestions to help himself assume the responsibilities which will be his. The following proposals may represent a way to begin.

- Do provide a sponsor who has enough time to sit down frequently and answer questions or discuss prob-

Wilhelm Brumm, a teacher from West Germany, supervises the trimming job on a Christmas tree for Miss Helen Schmidt's third grade class.

COURTESY, MILDRED PAULSON, MADRONA SCHOOL, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON





COURTESY, WIMBERLEY SCHOOL, SAN MARCOS, TEXAS

Pupils at Wimberley School explain their work to visiting teachers from other lands.

lems. Inability to find satisfying answers to questions at the moment when they occur is frustrating indeed.

- *Do* try to become familiar with some aspects of the visitor's country—its customs, language, traditions and current happenings. Some reference to his land shows courtesy and interest, and can lead to mutual sharing.

- *Do* examine your own attitude toward visitors from abroad. Think of each one as another educator whose problems are comparable, although not necessarily similar. Thinking of him as a different kind of person will make conversation more difficult, whereas finding similarities will move your friendship along.

- *Do* demonstrate the principles of good educational practice in the way the program is developed for the visitor. Get his ideas, a knowledge of his interests and the nature of his prob-

lems as a basis for planning the days that he will spend in your community. See that important directions and suggestions are written on paper. Use a chart or diagram drawn as you talk together, to explain organizational practices. Above all, keep the schedule flexible, providing periods for rest during the day. Many visitors come from parts of the world where a midday siesta or break of two or more hours is expected and needed. See that the visitor has some time to himself to digest all the new experiences and to take care of his own personal affairs.

- *Do* speak clearly, slowly and distinctly even to visitors who have studied English and can speak it relatively well. If there is anyone in the community who speaks the visitor's language, plan a social contact so that he can relax and feel at home as often as possible during his stay. As

one strains to catch the words themselves, the accent, plus the meaning, it is wearing indeed to listen all day long to a foreign language.

- Do give the visitor an opportunity to spend time in the early stages of his visit in one school where he can put down roots, and begin to feel at home. Frequently visitors have reported being taken to five or more schools in one day—possibly to all the schools in a town or village. The superintendent or supervisor is looking at the visit from the public relations point of view. This cannot be the criterion if our purpose is to serve the best interests of the visitor from abroad.

What Experiences Should Be Assured Our Visitors?

Visiting teachers who come to the United States from other countries of the world, through sponsorship of government agencies are carefully selected, are usually outstanding persons in their profession, and have come for a specific purpose. One young man from an Asian country was asked, "How many applicants were there for this visit to the United States?" He answered modestly, "This is the first time such an opportunity has been offered. There were 2000." It is important that each visitor should have as many varied opportunities as possible to observe schools in terms of his particular interest. The sponsor needs to see that these observations are related to the total school program in concrete and understandable ways. Whether the interest be kindergarten education, supervision, classroom teaching, work of the principal or teacher education, it must not be stud-

ied in isolation, but must be seen in the perspective of a total program of education.

Recognize Principles

There needs to be enough discussion so that the visitor gets at the principles that are represented in each situation that he sees. Unless this sort of clarification is provided for, he may attempt to impose upon his own educational system, an exact duplicate of what he has observed in the United States. It must be stressed constantly that what he sees here in our country is (we hope) based upon our study of children's needs within the framework of the communities in which they live. The visitor's problem is to make a similar study when he returns home. Then in the light of the principles which he has been helped to discover, he can help to develop an educational program that is suited to the children of the country in which it is being used. The attempt to transplant bodily an activity program as such, textbooks, equipment and materials may defeat the very purpose for which the visitor has come to the United States.

We can help all our visitors to understand us better by explaining how long a time it has taken us in our schools to come from the traditional type of program to the one which many boys and girls enjoy today. If it is possible to have visitors see an activity program in its developmental stages, as teacher and children plan together, this will be most helpful. To see the teacher who has developed great skill in planning may not be too valuable unless the visitor can see the steps in the process, from kindergarten



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Children learn through group activities in the Sidney Lanier School, Gainesville, Florida.

or first grade through sixth, or at the same grade level with teachers varying in degree of skill.

See How Equipment, Textbooks and Materials Can Be Developed

It will be helpful to the visitor to see not only the textbook which has been written in the school system by a committee of teachers, but to see the various experimental or try-out editions through which it developed. If possible the visitor should see such a committee at work. Discussion should bring out in what ways he might adapt this plan in his own country.

To the extent that teachers and supervisors can show how they have improvised or built equipment themselves, with the children, or had it done in their own shop, visiting teachers will be encouraged to do a similar job in their home countries. In Thailand at the Chachoensao project, I was delighted to see how a piece of straw matting had been used as the back-

ground on which to paint in oils the map of Asia for reference use by children.

And the materials for work! Frequently we feel that materials are lacking, or that we do not have enough, and sometimes we are actually wasteful of them. This latter practice appalls our visitors. To the extent that teachers and children can show how they have adapted resources in their environment to develop teaching materials, or have made use of scrap or waste materials, the visitor can get ideas to use at home.

How May Visitors Contribute?

Visitors have much to contribute, too. We in the United States have a wonderful opportunity to be educated in the ways of other countries through our visitors. Such education should be something more than asking our visitors to make a talk or to answer questions. Perhaps through art, music, the dance, or literature children and adults can get more of the feeling

tone of another country, than in any other way. Our visitors are good teachers. They can teach a group of children or teachers using any of the above media. There should be time to have them talk informally with small groups no larger than 15 or 20 persons where there can be an exchange of "How do you do it?" between ourselves and our foreign friends. Needed, too, are experiences with members of a family group, for a weekend or a longer period. Wherever possible, any sponsoring group should attempt to maintain continuing contacts and exchanges of various kinds with visitors as they return to their home countries.

How May Our Philosophy of Education Be Clarified?

The most important and most difficult job is the one that concerns our philosophy of education. Almost invariably in any group that has returned to evaluate their experiences with Office of Education staff members the question comes up of "progressive" education, and in the same breath the problems of freedom and responsibility. It is not easy to explain that, desirably, children have only the amount of freedom that they can use wisely; that they are given responsibility in terms of their maturity level and previous experiences.

The visitors bring up illustrations of

what they saw and heard that conflict with our ideal of what modern education should be. When children live in a learning laboratory, with freedom to move about, to talk with other children in a businesslike way, to work in groups, to take initiative, we say these are evidences of good teaching and learning. Many visitors may come from a country where children sit at desks, where the teacher writes a paragraph on the blackboard which children memorize, where the teacher asks the questions and the children answer. For them it may be difficult to harmonize our accepted practices with a quite different way of teaching and learning. But it is on-the-spot discussion which must attempt to bridge the gap and to develop a real understanding of why our schools are as they are. Schools are a product of the culture in which they have developed. Ideas of what is a good school change with the years. We must have reasons for such change that we can express in concrete ways.

Someone has said, "Between those who have seen and those who have not, there is a gulf fixed that words cannot bridge." Since all of us cannot travel around the world to see for ourselves we must add to our words every other possible means of interpretation and communication so that we and people in other lands may better understand each other.



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