

Growing Into Working Together

Through "open house," panels, classroom visits, letters and other means, an alert school interprets its program and is responsive to the concerns and needs of its children, parents and community.

"Don't you teach phonics?"

"When I ask Junior what he learns in school, why does he either shrug his shoulders or say, 'I don't know?'"

"School is so different from when I went that I just don't understand what is going on."

AT MADRONA SCHOOL we tried to answer some of these questions and comments by parents.

At first, we said, "Come to Open House." And they came: mother, father, brother, sister, babe in Daddy's arms and grandfather on his cane. They visited Sister's first grade room and saw the life-sized cutout she had painted of herself sitting in her chair, the copy of her name she was learning to print, the clay model of the guess-which-story-I'm-thinking-of figure and today's reading story on the blackboard. Sister could "read" the story, too, but the reading evidently did not satisfy Mother and Daddy, for they

said to the teacher later, a little uneasily, "Hasn't she just memorized that?"

It was pleasant for parents and teachers to have the little chat, the children were taking pride in showing their school and teachers to their parents, and there was a feeling that school was a happy and a good place for children to be. But the questions still persisted: "Are the children just memorizing their reading?" "Why isn't Johnny reading as well as Willie?" "Can't we have teachers on a panel at PTA meeting to answer questions?"

The teachers were shy about sitting in front of a meeting and having questions fired at them; so a compromise was made: teachers sat in the audience with a mediator in front to take the questions. He sifted these, answered part himself if necessary, and gave the teachers what they could answer with confidence. The parents were pleased with results of the meeting and the next year they wanted panels again.

Kindergartners Prepare for Reading

In the meantime, schools came prominently into the news because the needs were being emphasized for legis-

Elizabeth Neterer is principal of Lawton School, Public Schools, Seattle, Washington. This article describes a reporting program developed by Miss Neterer during her three years as principal of Madrona School in Seattle.

lation. Schools were bulging. There were not enough classrooms, not enough teachers, and teachers were not being paid enough to hold good ones. Kindergartens were on the firing line with arguments such as, "If we give up kindergartens there will be extra space, extra teachers and extra money."

The principal stepped into one of the kindergartens saying, "I'd like to stay a few minutes to take notes for a letter to send the parents before election next week." The teacher smiled and said, "That's a good idea."

Feeling that most people need an interpretation of what they see going on in kindergarten, the principal focused his letter on reading. This was because parents generally are more concerned about their children's progress in reading than with any other school activity. He wrote:

"Because all of you would enjoy visiting in the classroom but most of you are not able to do so, I am taking this means of sharing with you, from time to time, some of my classroom visits.

"Yesterday morning I dropped into one of the kindergartens for a few minutes. I could not help being impressed by the fact that everything the children were doing contributed not only to living happily with one another but also, in some way, to making it easier for them to learn to read and write.

"Three boys had made a rocket ship with blocks. They were piloting the ship, talking with each other over their two-way radios and manipulating the rocket controls. Anything they will read about airplanes in years to come will have meaning and interest for them. Furthermore, their play showed

the teacher which ideas were accurate and which ones needed correction.

"The block building was doing more than revealing children's ideas and developing an interest in aircraft. It was giving the children pleasure in attacking a job and confidence in their own power to deal successfully with it. This is one of the very valuable preparations for learning the difficult set of habits one must learn in order to read.

"Learning to converse is another important skill that contributes to success in reading and the boys, building the ship and playing together in it, were getting plenty of practice in that.

"Some children were working with paints, scissors and crayons. With all of these, they were doing more than showing their ideas of the way people, animals and houses function. They were learning to coordinate fine muscles of hand and eye. These are necessary skills for one who writes.

"Other children were playing with jig-saw puzzles. These were not only developing coordination of muscles but giving children experience in noticing similarities and differences, a habit without which one cannot learn to read. It takes fine powers of discernment to notice the difference, for instance, between "come" and "came" or "want" and "went" or "moon" and "noon." Our language is full of these traps.

"Another valuable preparation was finger-painting—a glorified mud pie scribbling. Colored starch was put on large sheets of paper and children were scrubbing it around happily. Doctors of emotionally disturbed children claim that this is one of the most valuable activities for children who



COURTESY, MILDRED PAULSON, MADRONA SCHOOL, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

Madrona School children sketch native northwest coast life at the Washington State Museum.

are tense or on edge. They can vent ugly feelings smearing colored starch all over the paper and no matter how angry the stroke, the effect is always interesting and acceptable to the rest of the group. Tense people who are always on edge have a hard time learning to read.

"The teacher rang a bell and every child gave complete attention. 'You have just two more minutes to finish your work,' she said.

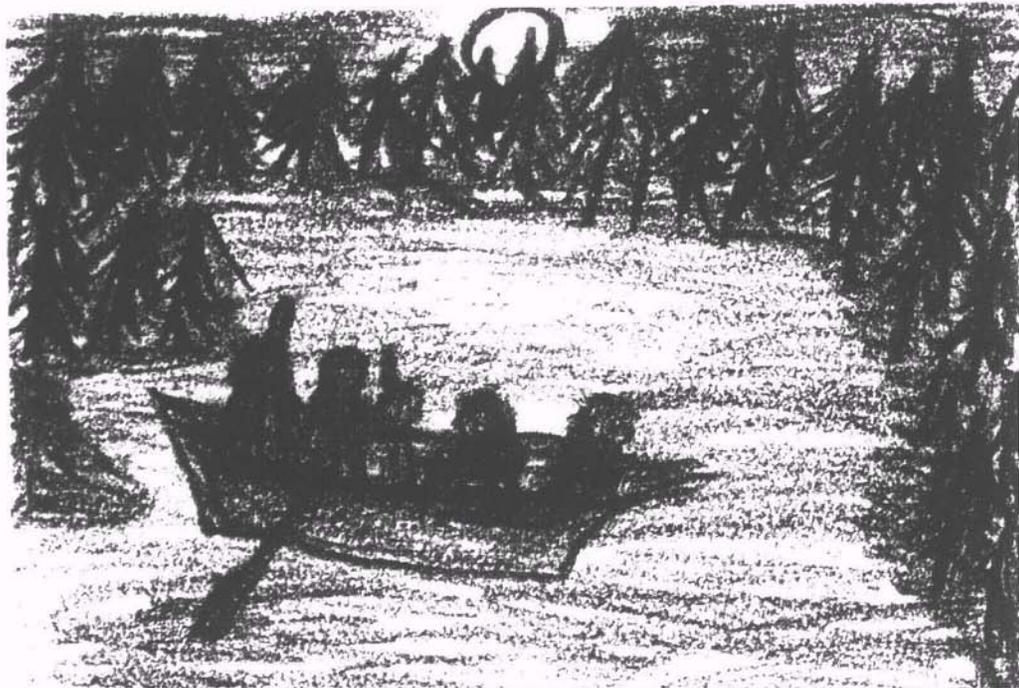
"The children went back to work contentedly. A little girl came to where I was sitting. 'That bell means no more starting work,' she said. Habits of ac-

cepting routine are valuable assets to a first grader.

"Another child came to my chair with, 'Will you help me with the apron?' Before I could reach out my hands a small boy was saying, 'I'll help you,' and he helped unfasten the apron ties. Asking for help when it is needed and having a spirit of helpfulness are two more preparations for success in attacking complicated habits and skills.

"Aside from these learnings, children were also getting:

- A happy, well-ordered experience of experimenting with materials to test their own powers



COURTESY, MARILYN LAVELLE (9 YEARS)

The Indian boys are taking Mr. Denny and Mr. Low to Olympia for supplies. A child's original drawings tell more of his understanding than he can ever tell with his lips.

- Opportunity to taste the joys of success
- A feeling of worth - whileness among their peers
- A confidence in their ability to accomplish."

Parents immediately began to speak appreciatively of the letter and nothing more was heard at school about giving up kindergartens. The kindergartens assumed added status in the building and the teachers were confident that the principal could see and understand some of the value of kindergarten education.

A Combined Grade Studies Water

Before long, a fourth-fifth grade in-

vited parents and principal to a science lesson. This visit was used as an opportunity to share with all the parents an experience in a combination grade; for parents had complained about their children's being in a "split" room where "a teacher can't possibly teach two grades as well as she can one." Among other things, the letter stated:

"Today I would like to take you with me to a fourth-fifth grade where the entire class has been studying water, its characteristics and its uses. As a summarizing activity an informal program was planned in which every child had a part. It consisted of experiments, demonstrations and reports.

"The reports made reading an important and desirable asset without

penalizing or discouraging the slow, plodding readers. . . . Even 'poor' readers made important contributions. They had secured their information from various sources—parents, friends, radio, TV—and had written the short reports themselves. With familiar content and words they were accustomed to using, they read their papers with fluency and confidence, the most valuable experience possible for a halting reader.

“What made the lesson exciting was the fact that the teacher gave each child opportunity to make his best contribution no matter what his grade classification might be. The most alert

child could prepare a report commensurate with his ability, while the most plodding one could make an equally acceptable contribution.”

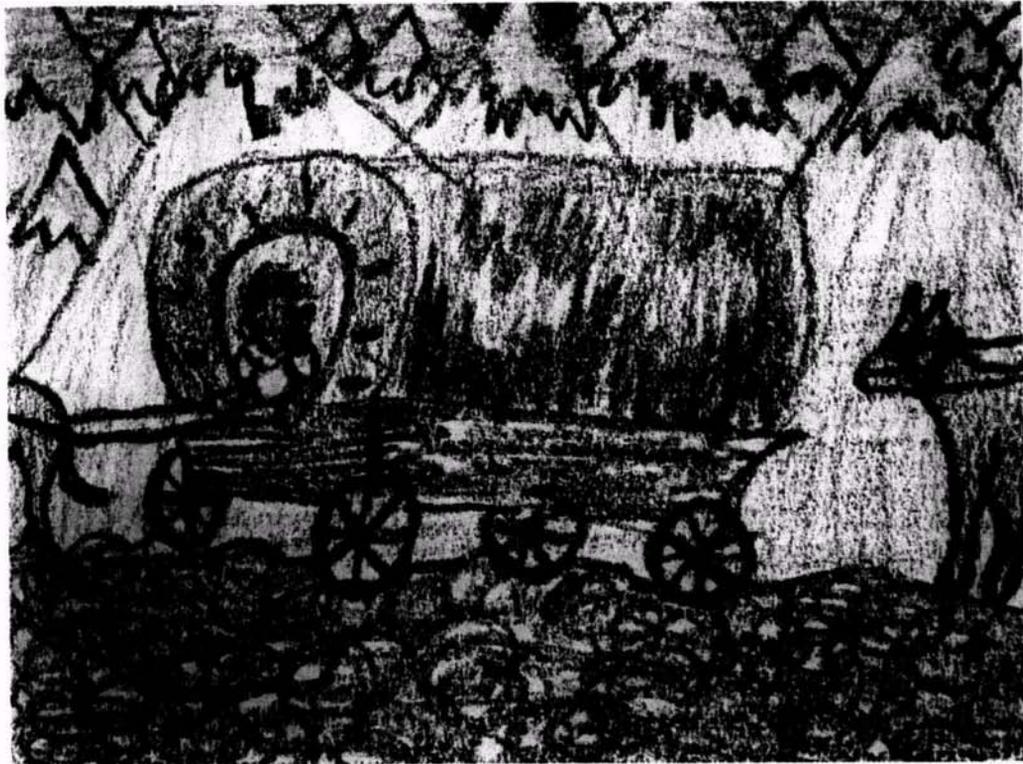
Behaviors Are Learned

Another fourth grade had already planned a “potlatch” for parents so this experience, too, was shared with a stronger and stronger feeling that visitors need to have an interpretation of what they see. The letter, in part, read:

“Without question, the children learned a great deal of factual and accurate information about Northwest Coast Indians. They were also learning other important skills:

The Dennys are crossing the mountains on their way to the Oregon country.

COURTESY, MARILYN LAVELLE (9 YEARS)



- How to organize questions and seek answers

- How to go to resource material for accurate information

- How to work together on committees; and they were having a happy experience sharing their information.

"The 'potlatch' represented a gift-giving festival of Puget Sound Indians. Children had made gifts for their parents—necklaces and bracelets made of sea shells and painted beautiful colors. A good deal of art-craft work had gone into the making of these lovely gifts. Evidences of art expression were all around the room, particularly interesting because a child's original drawings tell more of his understanding than he can ever tell with his lips. There were sketches children made at the museum, drawings showing an Indian making a canoe, another showing how to split boards from a tree, another showing whaling implements. There was a wild cat remarkably well drawn and a painting of Chief Seattle which was easily recognizable.

"All kinds of resources had been tapped to get information. . . . The thinking and searching for accurate information which went into working out the play pushed children into reading, writing, arithmetic, social studies, music, rhythms and even physical education. . . . The children worked out the dramatization, welcome songs, chants and dances with the help of teachers; and they found descriptions for and played a tug-of-war and 'laughing' game after the Indian fashion.

"A creative dramatization is an unusually fine means of developing intercultural understandings and appreciations."

Interpretation Through Many Means

By this time other teachers in the building were arranging for visits with a conference in which parents could ask questions, immediately following the class lessons. (Children were sent to another room during the conference.) These were followed by an interpretive letter. By the end of the year, every teacher had invited parents for a lesson and conference; and parents and teachers alike felt this type of visiting was giving greater satisfaction than the usual drop in-drop out visit. Pressure on panels was relieved as parents felt that their questions were being answered.

Another step is being taken. For more than two years, Seattle has been presenting school telecasts through the courtesy of KING-TV which have been helping to interpret the schools to parents. Actual class lessons have been shown the public as well as other types of programs. This year, Educational TV is on the air twenty hours a week showing patrons what is happening in the schools of the State of Washington.

There is evidence that all these means—Open House, PTA programs, interpreted classroom visits with conferences and telecasts—are helping in the slow process of increasing understanding of what schools are teaching, developing confidence and pride in the schools, and making possible greater coordination between home and school.

The next step is the gaining of a clearer and clearer understanding of what citizens really want of the schools.

Copyright © 1955 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.