

Uniting Forces to Improve Education

Column Editor: Francis L. Drag

Contributors: Dorothea Hinman

Royce Johnson

Public School and University Unite Forces at the Neighborhood Level

IN ANSWER TO Communism today we loudly acclaim our devotion to democracy as a way of life. Yet we sometimes seem to forget that the distinctive quality of democracy does *not* primarily come through large scale technological and economic advances or spectacular decisions of national and international councils, but through the growth and fulfillment of human beings which enable each one to become an effective participant in the democratic way of life—determining what conditions make for human welfare and growth of culture, and then helping to provide these conditions. Wherever this process is going on, democracy is being continually reborn: government is then truly “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Do we in education also sometimes forget which values must have first priority in democracy? Frequently we become so absorbed in building our bright new consolidated schools and the new research laboratories and libraries at our great universities that we do not observe what is happening daily in the living of the children and of their families for whose growth and welfare these institutions are supposedly designed. Do we not need to focus our attention more penetratingly on

the natural germinative center of our democracy—the family in its local neighborhood? Recent experiments have shown us clearly that it is here in these intimate, long continuing groups that human personality undergoes the most telling period of nurture. Yet today, even though the majority of the public is engaged in providing human nurture through homemaking and neighborhood-making, there is evidence of much stumbling and failure through lack of education for these most important vocations. If nurture of human personality essential to a democracy is to become sounder, have not we, as leaders in the function of public education, become responsible for helping the local family and neighborhood to function more effectively?

It was this thinking that caused two people to start working together¹ in the spring of 1953 in a small western Pennsylvania community. One of these in-

¹The contributors of this article wish to acknowledge the guidance offered in this experiment by the findings and working principles growing out of the studies in family and community development directed by Regina H. Westcott, consulting psychologist, Elm Grove, Wisconsin.

They also wish to express appreciation for the interested and helpful cooperation of several members of the Department of Education at the Pennsylvania State University, headed by Charles M. Long.

dividuals was a supervising principal responsible for four six-room elementary schools, the other was a university instructor responsible for helping students prepare themselves for teaching children. Our guiding question was: How can *all* of us who are members of *this* community improve the conditions provided *here* for human nurture? Soon many more persons became involved: teachers and children in the four schools and the families of those children, interested local and county leaders, and the university students invited to be members of the community while in training here for teaching.² There followed a period of cooperative exploration through which we all helped to uncover and identify the most crucial problems which we were meeting every day as we tried to fulfill our common task of helping children grow.

Our exploration brought some startling discoveries. A major one was our lack of appreciation as professional educators for the child-as-a-vital-part-of-his-family-and-neighborhood-groups. We looked on him primarily as an individual to be instructed in certain specific matters we had arranged in a course of study. Yet, when examined, many of the difficulties which children were having with school work or in "being good" proved to have their origins either in disturbed family and neighborhood relationships or in conflicts between the values and practices

²For the past four years the Pennsylvania State University has followed the plan of sending students studying to be elementary school teachers, as a group, to do "student teaching" in a community away from the university campus. A faculty member is assigned to guide this off-campus education.

upheld by the family and neighborhood, on the one hand, and by the school, on the other hand. Frequently we had been treating these difficulties at the *symptomatic* level as problems associated with the learning of specific subject matter and skills, or as resistance or disobedience to the teacher or school regulations. Our approach then added an extra problem to the original one, thus increasing rather than decreasing the child's distress.

Our second major discovery was a related one. It was our lack of appreciation as parents for the child-as-a-vital-part-of-his-neighborhood-and-school-groups. Oftentimes we treated his unacceptable conduct with little realization that it frequently resulted from disturbed relationships within these outside groups, or from a conflict between the values imposed by them and those characteristic of his own family. Punishment of his particular action then tended to increase his sense of conflict, insecurity or injustice, thus paving the way for more abnormal behavior.

Now we were facing a searching question: "If we adults, even the professional leaders among us, have as much to learn about specific life situations as do the children, how can we bring this about most quickly and effectively?" We realized not only that adults must learn more about particular children reacting in their particular life situations, but also about, and from, one another so we could work consistently and cooperatively together. Only one decision seemed open to us—to *try to integrate the education of the parents, teachers, teachers-to-be, and the children in the same educa-*

tional situation. There would be, of course, some differences as to kinds and modes of functioning within this situation. We hoped for four important outcomes:

1. The learning of all of us would be sounder, more meaningful and vital because it would come through real experiences — not remote “talking about.”

2. The children would experience the deep security coming through seeing all the adults responsible for their guidance working together. They would be saved the difficulties arising from misunderstanding, inconsistency and lack of cooperation.

3. The children would also be learning how to provide conditions for human growth so that they could gradually work responsibly with us.

4. The interaction resulting from the differing perspectives expressed by the adults would become mutually instructive, and even transformative, as we worked shoulder-to-shoulder.

Due to an impending administrative consolidation, there was only one full year for this experiment — 1953-54. Here briefly are listed some of the forms which our efforts began to take as we planned and worked as one educational unit.

A Post-School Year Parent-Teacher-Child Workshop

Several teachers and some interested parents and children worked, played and studied together for an intensive three-week period in June 1953.

Monthly Parent-Teacher Workshop

One evening a month during the following school year interested parents,

teachers and teachers-to-be came together to work on the problems which they discovered in guiding the growth of the children.

Room Conferences

Some of the teachers (along with teachers-to-be) planned group conferences with the parents of the children in the classrooms to help them to know one another and to better understand their common problems. The children were sometimes included.

Visiting of Families

This was carried on by both teachers and teachers-to-be. The purpose was not to solve specific problems but to express to all families the genuine interest of the school in their welfare, the school's real need for parent participation in planning, and the openness of the school staff to suggestion and information from families and neighborhoods.

Visiting and Participation of Parents at School

Parents were encouraged to visit *whenever* they could throughout the school year rather than during just one special week. Specific parents were invited to help in planning and carrying out a number of classroom and all-school experiences of the children.

Throughout the year there were many evidences that the deepening of understanding in all participants was beginning to bring several specific changes in the school situation. Two important improvements were a curriculum better integrated with life and a more home-like atmosphere in each classroom and in the school as a

whole. Some parents reported considerable decrease in tension between themselves and the children in their home situations because no longer was the school pulling one way, the home another. They commented openly on the new feeling of welcome they experienced when they came to the school. Some teachers expressed considerable release from psychic tension as they began to enjoy the children as growing persons and to lose their fear of one another, administrators included, and of parents. They also felt considerable lifting of their physical load as the children took over more and more responsibility under the guidance of teachers-to-be and parents. This was especially appreciated during the noon hour. A seventy year old janitor in one of the school buildings expressed in this way what was happening: "I see children learning who never before would learn anything. They don't seem to have the same fear of being taught. . . . It's a healthier spirit. There seems to be a kind of congregation of interests."

The basic aspect in this experiment was our all coming together as *person with person*, finding meaningful common ground in our concern for bettering the conditions for the kind of human growth and fulfillment indispensable in our American Democracy. All were learners, and all were teachers—even the children. Each used the others as resources as needed, and the unique resources of each were called upon without regard for age, place in

school, or official position. Out of these experiences was born and reborn one deep conviction: there are no *natural* walls and partitions between teachers and parents, between administrators and teachers, between the universities and the public schools and the local community, between professors and students, between any or all of us and the children. There are only those barriers which we erect to conceal our limitations and so bolster our security to hold things in line with some pet theory or plan of our own, or to protect our feelings of self-importance.

In this undertaking, many of us found deeply meaningful satisfactions through: (a) Our richer understanding of the people around us and of our responsible function in this life situation; (b) our delight in witnessing the increased joy-in-living which came to others in our community as they grew along with us; (c) our thrill over the potency and high quality of group effort which is sincere and cooperative, achieving far more than the effort of any one person.

—DOROTHEA HINMAN, *assistant professor of elementary education, Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania; and ROYCE JOHNSON, director of elementary education, New Cumberland Joint School District, New Cumberland, Pennsylvania (formerly supervising principal of Lawrence Township, Clearfield, Pennsylvania, where this experiment was undertaken before consolidation).*



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