

that methods can be derived to surmount the deficiencies of blindness. He has demonstrated that person-to-person relationships and teacher-group relationships can be positive and successful. His experiences should give

hope to those handicapped who can also demonstrate the ability to carry on teaching activities. Perhaps Bill has taught us something which will help us to improve and strengthen our own methods of teaching.

DORIS YOUNG

Identifying and Utilizing Children's Interests

What are new techniques for ascertaining children's interests?

How can effective means be created for utilizing these interests?

These challenging topics are treated in this article.

INTEREST is an essential factor for learning."

"If the children are interested you will have no behavior problems."

"Develop the curriculum according to the interests of the group."

Statements like these have been proposed for many years. That interest is an essential for learning is an accepted fact, but interests remain intangible factors in the process. Although much has been written about children's interests, teachers continue to ask questions regarding the factor of interest in planning educative experiences for and with children. Is the teacher to take the list of units or topics from the curriculum bulletin and "make them interesting," or does he begin with the interests of the pupil? How can children's interests be identified, and how

can the interests be used effectively?

A recent investigation of factors associated with the science interests of intermediate grade children revealed further evidence regarding this factor in learning.¹ Several techniques were used to identify the interests of 129 children in grades four, five and six throughout one school year. Certain factors of growth and environment were analyzed to determine their relationships to the development of the interests expressed by the children. A detailed study of the science interests of one class was reported as these interests were utilized in developing the science curriculum.

¹ Doris Young, "Factors Associated with the Science Interests of a Selected Group of Intermediate Grade Children," (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 1956.)

Identifying Individual Interests

There has been a tendency to speak rather glibly of children's interests, but the problems of actually identifying them have often been minimized or ignored. The investigation revealed that a general interest inventory does not give sufficient evidence about a child's interest pattern. Such inventories may include questions regarding the child's activities, collections, favorite books, and preferred television programs and movies. However, observation records may reveal very different interests from those expressed by the child in responding to an inventory. For example, a boy may say he likes to play baseball because, as he perceives his role in our culture, a ten year old boy *should* like to play baseball. Daily observation, parent conferences, conversation with the child, creative writing, and art expression in a variety of media reveal much more accurately the activities in which a child actually participates. These, too, may not be his real interests. Limitations of time, space and equipment may prevent expression of some interests.

It was found that anecdotal records were important also in revealing factors related to the interest which might be expressed by the child. Perhaps interests, *per se*, are merely superficial expressions of underlying basic needs for love, attention, belonging, and so forth. A child may feign enthusiasm for activities related to electricity because he desperately wants to belong to the small group working on a project in school and in Joe's basement after school. The teacher who is attempting to identify children's interests must

also note the interpersonal relationships of individuals.

Cultural expectations may also be reflected in interests expressed by girls and boys. "Nice little girls" are not supposed to be interested, for example, in mechanical toys and chemistry sets. It was found that as girls became older they expressed greater dislike of such topics as aviation, energy and machines. Comments such as, "Oh, that's just for boys," reflected the idea that girls were not to be interested in such areas of science in our society. Teachers who seek to utilize children's interests need to encourage children to freely express their interests.

Some of these difficulties of ascertaining children's interests were overcome by use of two "projective-type" instruments designed for the investigation of science interests. One of the instruments consisted of film titles related to nine categories of science phenomena. As the child indicated degree of interest in the film it was possible to measure his interest in the various categories. In responding to the second instrument the child revealed his interests by checking "wondering questions" he would like answered. By scoring the instruments, the major interests of each child were easily determined. It was found that these instruments made it possible for children to express interests which were not verbalized in the general inventories. For example, interest in human growth and development was seldom expressed in the inventories, but items related to this category were frequently underscored or given heavier markings to indicate the child was very interested in it. When ascertain-

ing children's interests it is also important to identify those topics in which the child is not interested. The use of such projective instruments enables the teacher to identify the interests of each child. Such instruments may be designed for other areas of the curriculum. However, no single technique is adequate in identifying the interests of each child. Inventories and observations provide important information regarding children's interests.

Utilizing Children's Interests

Once the teacher has assessed the interests of each child in the class, he faces the problem of using these findings effectively. The evidence collected in the study cited indicates three ways interests may be utilized by the teacher.

It was found that children in grades four, five and six had an "abiding readiness for," or interest in, certain science phenomena throughout the year. The stability of interest in the universe, the earth, animals, human growth and the weather is significant in planning the science program for children in the middle grades. Although these peaks of interest were evident at all age levels, there was a wide range of individual interests. The data indicate that the concept of a "group interest" is an educational fallacy. In no class did more than one third of the children express the same major interest in science.

As teachers plan with children some have recognized that a vocal minority in the class may be unduly influencing the direction of the activities, yet they say, "The class was so interested!" How often have teachers waited until some

bright lad finally discovered what the *teacher's* interest was, and made the suggestion which the teacher happily seized and expanded into a long unit? If we consider the criteria of valid interest to be enthusiasm on the part of the children, continued attention, and work without further teacher stimulation, it seems we should not be critical of such procedures when such valid interest develops. However, it is important that we honestly analyze the interacting forces within the classroom environment as interests are identified and utilized.

The teacher must first provide opportunity for children to select areas of interest to them and guide them in working in small groups to satisfy these stable interests. More attention must be given to a type of organization which allows children to pursue their interests. The attention of the entire class may be focused upon a common core as each small group reports its work. At this stage the teacher must diagnose needs of the class and provide further experiences which will clarify concepts and develop further understandings.

A second means of utilizing children's interests is by providing opportunity for children to share their interests with the group each day. Tape recordings and anecdotal records of the activities of one fourth grade class included in the study revealed the importance of the sharing period. This period is frequently omitted from the intermediate grade program, but it was found that the contributions led to many "science teaching situations." For the purposes of the investigation, only contributions related to science

were tabulated; in the 175 sharing periods during the year, 145 contributions related to science were recorded. These contributions included objects of interest, current news, and questions and comments concerning events in the environment. Numerous contributions concerning social institutions and political events were also made. An example of the way one child's contribution was utilized may indicate the role of the teacher in making this period more than a "show and tell time":

One boy presented a periscope as this recording was made.

STUART: I wrote to the address on the cereal box to get this thing I'm going to show. It came in pieces and I had to put it together. See, it's a periscope. I'll pass it around, but be careful. It was really hard to fix it so you could see.

TEACHER: Stuart, could you draw a diagram to show how we are able to see with a periscope?

STUART: (Attempting a diagram) Well, I don't know — you look here, and you see here. The mirrors do something.

GARY: It's caused by light reflecting. Light goes in straight lines like this. When it hits the mirror here it bounces back.

CHRIS: Why doesn't it come back in the same place then?

TEACHER: Susan, will you bring the ball from the drawer? Now bounce the ball to Mike. (Several bounce the ball at different angles.) Can anyone tell how this might be like the reflection of light?

Discussion of reflection continues and more sketches are made.

TEACHER: Who knows where a periscope might be useful?

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MICKEY: They use them in submarines. It works like this. (He drew a diagram showing the submarine under water and pointed out how light was reflected.)

As children are encouraged to ask questions, to give demonstrations and to apply principles to other situations, the contribution may lead to stimulation of interest and to further learning.

A third task of the teacher is to utilize the potential interest which appears to reside within each child as he interacts with his environment. The stimulation of interest has been considered a goal of the school, but there is little research to indicate successful means of achieving this goal.

Frequently the parents of the children included in the study noted that school field trips had contributed to the development of interests of their children. The data indicate that children who had opportunities to handle materials, to make experiments and to feel satisfaction in planning group work had higher interest scores in the categories of science phenomena in which such activities had been provided. The teacher may initiate certain activities which will extend interests. An example of the experiences of a fourth grade class may illustrate this third responsibility of the teacher:

According to the instruments used in the fall to identify the interests of the children, there was very little interest in the category, plants. As the spring season progressed, a few children brought contributions which indicated some interest in growing things, but there was desultory interest on the part of most of the children in the group, when these contributions were discussed in the sharing period. This appeared to be an appropriate category for a test of the possibility of stimulating interest.

The teacher planned a walk in the woods, a trip to the forest preserve, and showed several films. Teacher stimulation was necessary for the first three days, but as opportunity was provided for experimenting with plants and for planning work, valid interest seemed to be present. It may be noted that some children remained uninterested in plants. Two boys who expressed continuous interest in chemistry were directed to a book about chemical gardening. They were soon finding satisfaction in growing plants without soil. Three children who had expressed more interest in medicine were encouraged to find out about bacteria.

There was valid interest among the children in the class for approximately three weeks. However, they continued to care for their plants and to bring in materials related to plants for several weeks after attention was focused upon other activities. In the evaluation period one boy remarked, "I didn't know you could do so much with plants!" When the instruments used to ascertain interests were administered later in the spring, the scores for the plant category were found to be higher than they were in the fall.

Teachers may provide the initial impetus for experiences which will extend and stimulate interest in a substantial part of the group. However,

it is important to provide for individual interests within this framework. If the experiences initiated by the teacher do not lead to enthusiasm, to attention, and to continuation of activity without continued teacher stimulation it becomes necessary to redirect the work and to plan with the children for other activities. The teacher who is aware of each child's needs will be able to utilize expressed interests effectively.

"The world is so full of a number of things" is perhaps truer today than ever before. Thus the problem of selection of educative experiences becomes increasingly complex. Children's interests must be utilized effectively to select activities which will provide opportunity for them to learn as much as possible about the world in which they live. The subject of children's interests may seem to be old, but the challenge to create new techniques of ascertaining them, to find more effective means of utilizing them, and to develop methods which will stimulate new interests, is as new as tomorrow.

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