

Teachers Are Concerned With the Growing Edge

New programs and projects help teachers explore more effective means for meeting needs of today's children and young people.

AT THIS time in the United States thousands of skillful teachers are working with children and youth in creative and worthwhile ways to develop ever-better citizens for democracy. This is an especially rewarding fact to consider when one is faced also with continuing criticism of public education of both a constructive and a damaging nature. It is essential for the members of the teaching profession to take stock, occasionally, of the kind of work teachers are doing. This activity is important both as a professional evaluation technique and as a planned program of information to the lay public.

This writer has an unimpaired faith in the lay public as well as an optimistic confidence in the ability of the teaching profession. It is difficult sometimes to maintain this optimism in the face of carping criticism by many citizens and the failure of a growing segment of the profession to do creative and functional teaching based on our knowledge of the actual needs of children and youth in this era. It is good, therefore, to take a spe-

cial look at some of the ways in which teachers are aware of the forward look in education and what they are doing to emphasize new techniques and research findings in their own jobs of educating young people.

Teachers and school administrators are looking as never before to the university schools of education, the teachers colleges, the experimental centers, and the research staffs of education in all parts of the country for aid, ideas and activities which they can use to improve and vitalize educational planning and techniques for young people. These are the vanguard movements which public schools themselves are not always able to carry on. While public schools should never cease to attempt to go beyond their current level, it seems only right that they should leave the wholly new and untried phases of teaching and learning to the centers of experimentation and research for examination, trial and revision. Such findings can then be used, even experimentally, in community schools with greater security and confidence. Thus, good public schools are taking ideas from the vanguard movements in education and are using these to expand the ever-growing edge of good instruction in the classrooms of America.

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Outdoor Education

One of these vanguard movements of particular value to city schools is encompassed in the various programs of outdoor education which are being inaugurated particularly at the elementary school level. As our urban centers of population increase, both in number of people and in physical area, nature and the rural areas are pushed farther and farther away from city children. An understanding of nature and its processes, of conservation of natural resources, and of the fun to be had outdoors, is essential in the education of young children. One city school system,¹ through the vitality and interest of a group of its classroom teachers, has developed over the years a comprehensive program in outdoor education. Under the direction of a supervisor of outdoor education, classroom teachers are taking children on study trips to parks and wild-life reservations where, with the help of a nature guide who is also a qualified teacher and science specialist on the professional staff of the school system, teachers and children study birds, animals, wild flowers, and trees. All winter, birds are fed near shelter houses where children, sitting quietly, can observe their appearance and habits.

Still another phase of this school system's outdoor education program is the summer gardening experience for children who desire this kind of activity. On all the elementary school playgrounds where there is room, gardens are developed by children under the guidance of professional leaders, in this case a talented elementary school principal assisted by classroom teachers. In addition to the gardening activity on the school grounds, children who have space for a garden at

¹ The Cleveland Heights City School District, Cleveland, Ohio.

home can work there and have their garden visited by the garden director and his assistants. In the fall, many schools have garden fairs or exhibits where the harvest of vegetables and fruit is displayed for parents and classmates.

Another outdoor education project is the annual trip to a real sugar bush in the spring when the sap is running and maple sirup is being made. This is usually a study trip reserved for third grade children in this school system. Children at this level are putting special emphasis on the early development of their community and the ways their forebears lived. Sugar-making is carried on in much the same way now as it was in past years.

The most complex phase of outdoor education in these schools is the week of school camp which each child has with his teacher once during his elementary school years. The school system maintains, during the winter months, a camp staffed by four fully certified elementary school teachers. Groups of children, usually at the fifth or sixth grade levels, spend a week in this completely rural area of woods and streams learning about nature as well as about themselves and each other. This experience is a process of living and working and thinking together that teachers consider invaluable for themselves and the children.

These kinds of activities, not isolated, but a part of the schools' total program, can be motivation and opportunity for good discussion, much written expression, and eagerness for reading about what has been seen and what may be seen in other places and under different circumstances. Here is vitality of learning sparked by enthusiasm for more and varied similar experiences. This kind of experience is bounded only by teachers' own interests and vitality.

The development of programs of this

nature requires foresight and knowledge on the part of teachers and parents and other citizens of the community. These programs are very costly in terms of both money and time. Schools, in these days of rising costs, must be very sure of the worth of their curricular offerings in terms of children's living and learning. The teachers and principals who participate wholeheartedly and effectively in these phases of the outdoor education experience for young children do so with an understanding of the values and objectives which they hold for children and the ways in which this part of their teaching contributes to the development of creative living for these particular children now and in the future.

Moreover, a study of the outdoors is not restricted to city children; nor is it necessary to develop programs which require a large outlay of money in order to provide good learning experiences for children. One Maine teacher, appalled by the lack of interest her children displayed about the gorgeous trees among which they lived, developed a unit on Maine trees. For a year these children studied the trees of their countryside as the seasons came and went. In Maine the trees are not only beautiful as scenery but they are a part of the living of the people. They are almost a palpable presence. For young children to grow up unaware of the trees and of their value to man seemed, to this forward-looking teacher, a waste and loss in children's development.

Another Maine teacher, also concerned with the growing edge of learning as it related to his seacoast town and his particular group of sixth-grade children, studied, with his youngsters, the ways in which the sea affects the most intimate phases of their lives. They learned, specifically, about the fishing industry: its

hazards, its economics and its geography. These children talked and wrote and read about phases of learning which concerned them immediately and, in the process, pushed their own growing edges further out.

Health Education

In this day of new health knowledge and a growing understanding of one's own body, surely learning about health ought to be realistic, functional and exciting for children. Teachers, concerned with the growing edge of learning, know that learning, to be effective, must have vitality for the learner. Often teachers, enthusiastic and excited about a phase of learning which has vitality for them, deplore the lack of interest exhibited by children. If teachers, in a case of this kind, can be helped to analyze their thinking, their planning, and their knowledge of present-day boys and girls, they will be able to see what has happened to the children in any specific teaching-learning situation. Health learning has often been the victim of this sort of wasted activity on the part of teachers. One school system² has vitalized its health teaching by bringing the study to children through the services of a great metropolitan health museum.³ This school system has employed a health coordinator who works with the classroom teachers both in the schools and in the museum itself. As a member of the staffs of both the school system and of the museum, he has an unusual opportunity to help teachers project the growing edge of learning beyond the classroom walls.

Still another phase of health with which the schools in one particular area are concerned is in the field of human

²The Shaker Heights City School District, Cleveland, Ohio.

³The Health Museum of Cleveland, Ohio.

reproduction and maturation.⁴ Many of the school systems in this area have organized programs with the aid of the Family Health Association, a community agency, to help children gain increasing knowledge about themselves. In this particular phase of learning, parents are drawn into the program by classes which prepare them for the teaching which their children are to receive. This has proved a successful procedure with instructors from the Family Health Association carrying on the instructional programs with parents and teachers. In this case, home and school are working together in an unusually realistic way to provide a good learning experience for children.

Parent Participation

Teachers honestly concerned with the forward-looking areas of education recognize the fact that no real progress can be made in improving learning for children and young people unless parents and other lay citizens are realistically involved in what the school is doing. Different schools are handling this phase of their responsibilities in different ways. Individual conferences between parents and teacher for reporting the school progress of a child; parent-education programs under the sponsorship of the PTA and with professional staff leadership; participation of parents and other lay people in curriculum planning, the financial structure of schools, and the development of community resources for the teaching and learning process—all these are ways of involving people in their schools. There is little likelihood that community pressures against modern education will prove overpowering when teachers and other school leaders openly

⁴ Metropolitan Cleveland and Cuyahoga County, Ohio.

and honestly and realistically bring lay citizens into the planning for the future.

There are certain specific ways in which these various programs have been carried out. One of the best areas of involvement of the lay public in the work of the schools is through the already-organized Parent - Teacher Association unit in the local school. PTA groups are eager for constructive professional leadership and forward-looking teachers and principals welcome the opportunity to provide it. They realize that in this way the real growing edge of the learning situation is extended in a practical fashion.

One school⁵ planned constructive, vital programs of parent education which involved the men and women of the community in discussion of school policies, teaching techniques, and the results of teaching in which they were realistically interested. The planning group of the PTA with the school staff, its principal, and the school system's director of elementary schools worked together in this effort with tremendous satisfaction and increased understanding of school problems and achievements. Among other innovations in PTA programming were a series of men's meetings on such topics as child development, auxiliary helps for classroom teachers, the content of the curriculum for the young child, reporting practices, and athletics for young children. It was discovered that the fathers of young children were interested enough in the education of their children to come to school in large numbers to discuss that education. These meetings, frequently sparked by a special resource person from a professional field, always included general discussion, questions and answers, personal experiences

⁵ The Oxford Elementary School of Cleveland Heights, Ohio.

so that everyone participated in the way he wished.

These are some of the ways in which classroom teachers have recognized the vanguard movements in education and have effectively shown their concern for the growing edge of learning for children and young people. There are almost endless ways in which individual teachers and groups of teachers can work constructively to develop programs in cooperation with parents to expand the growing edge of learning for particular children in a unique manner.

Beyond all else, teachers must have the freedom to develop these new ways of working with children. This freedom comes from basic intelligence, sure knowledge, and the security of public support of our schools. Ruth Streitz has summed up this point of view as follows:

... there is no doubt that the place of the teacher is becoming much more strategic than it was in earlier days. Today the teacher is not a mere cog in the school machinery; she is a vital part in the whole educative process. Teachers occupy important positions not only in dealing with seriously disturbed children but even more in dealing with the children found in a given grade in

the school. Understanding the principles of child growth and development and being able to apply these effectively and well have given the teacher her newly won status. The sound professionalization of teaching . . . is being recognized by the lay public. The respect accompanying this recognition is especially vital because acceptance of more functional presentation of subject matter by the public depends upon widespread confidence in the school workers using the newer interpretations of subject matter.⁶

Teachers everywhere, individually and in groups, are working in creative ways to develop educational programs for children which incorporate the best that is known of the ways in which children grow and develop, of their needs in curriculum, and of the manner in which they learn most effectively and permanently. Belief in the support of an informed community and an optimistic faith in the ability of teachers to grasp opportunities to expand the growing edge of learning for children will result in a finer education for youth than has yet been experienced.

⁶ Ruth Streitz, "Subject-Matter Interpretations," in *The American Elementary School*, Thirteenth Yearbook of the John Dewey Society. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1953. p. 339.

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