

They Come as Strangers

Into every schoolroom in every community today come boys and girls who are strangers, who have new and different values and customs. How can we use these rich resources? How can we meet these individual differences?

DANNY was back! He was bigger this year, in the fifth grade. Every fall about this time Danny returned. He and his sister had left with their parents early in May to go north and to travel for six months with the carnivals—to visit state fairs and county fairs and small-town summer shows. Danny's father had charge of one of the concessions at the carnivals, but when winter came he returned with his family to Florida. . . Yes, Danny was bigger now, but just as shy as ever. Yet he seemed glad to be back. He didn't have much to say as the other youngsters crowded around him. He just smiled at them and his big brown eyes looked from one to another. The teacher found a chance to talk with him that first day. "Yeah," he said, "I'm glad to come back. But I've missed so much school that I still can't read. Every year when I get back here I feel like a stranger."

- Outside, the snow was swirling. The pale December sun in that Illinois city did very little to give a look of warmth to the scene, for its appearances were spas-

modic and the rapidly-moving clouds threatened to hide it completely. Inside, the school was warm and it felt good. But there were so many people! So many rooms seemed to open off the hallway! And, strangest of all, there were white children and Negro children all together, talking to each other as they put on their mittens to go out at recess. Alexander felt very strange in his best clothes, even though they weren't very warm and he didn't see anyone else in a Sunday suit like that. What would these other kids think of him? The principal was really nice, though. . . His mother answered most of the questions for him, but finally the principal looked right at *him* and said, "Alexander, do you like to go to school?" "Yes, Ma'am," was all he could say. How could he tell her that he didn't rightly know if he liked this kind of school? How could he say that he didn't really go to school much in Mississippi this year, it was so far from where they lived and there was always work to do around the place, or some days he had to help his Mamma catch fish so they'd have something to eat? And how could he tell her that the readin' books were pretty hard, so he didn't do much in school anyway, except when they had

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'rithmetic? Maybe some time he could tell her if she ever asked him again. Besides, it was hard to say much to a white person, though his Mamma had taught him always to say, "Yes, Ma'am," and do what he was told. Alexander glanced out the window. The kids were playing in that queer snow, and it looked like fun. But he could never do that in his best clothes, and he didn't have any other clothes that were warm, either. Maybe his Auntie at the place they were living could find him a coat and some mittens. Or maybe when his Mamma started working at the factory she would have enough money to buy him some.

• Mickey was having a bad day! Miss Temple's patience was about at an end. Yesterday, his first day in this school, had been fine, but today was impossible! Interruptions all through sharing period, defiance of every routine rule, three fights in ten minutes during recess, and every other possible means of gaining attention! Everyone in the third grade knew by now that Mickey's father was a Navy flier, that Mickey had been in six schools already (in less than three years), and that this was "just a dumb old school" compared to some of the others he had attended! His transfer indicated that Mickey was a child of better-than-average ability and achievement in school, and Miss Temple had welcomed him as a real asset to her group—yesterday. But today, Mickey was definitely in command of the third grade, gaining their attention, proving his strength, and painting a picture of the glamorous life of a Navy child! Miss Temple wondered why he didn't get enough satisfaction out of using his abilities "the right way." How could she win him, help him find a friend, and show him the satisfactions of acceptable accomplishment in school? It was a real challenge, she knew.

• Jean's usual hearty appetite was lacking that day. Strange, too, that she didn't like fish, for most of these children claimed it was one of their favorite foods. The vegetable that day was cabbage, and Jean asked to have it taken off her plate. Mr. Elmore, junior high counselor, stood by, watched, and wondered. Jean's family, he knew, were agricultural migrants who had come to this area just two weeks ago to work in the cabbage fields. . . . A home visit helped answer Mr. Elmore's questions. The family lived in a dilapidated trailer. They drank water from the canal. They had moved to this community from another town nearby, where the whole family had helped in harvesting tomatoes for just a few weeks. Now, they had planned to work in the cabbage fields, but the freeze made it impossible for them to earn any money. So they were living on cabbage, grapefruit which was given to them, and fish which they caught mostly at night. School lunch was the only decent meal Jean had each day—except when it included fish and cabbage!

• Nancy had just finished college, and this was her first teaching job! The first month was going well, and her principal had commended her on many things. The rest of the faculty was so nice, too, and around school and in teachers meetings everyone was cordial and pleasant. There were two other new teachers on the faculty, and already the three of them had begun to feel very much at home in Central Elementary School. But, still—it was lonesome. The other two new teachers were married, so they had someone to go home to at the end of the day. Nancy had a nice little apartment—that was a good thing about this town, there were apartments available and you weren't expected to live in a room in somebody's house—but it was lonesome.

Everyone else seemed to belong to a closed little social group. The teachers talked about things they did together in the evenings or on weekends, but it seemed to be just those who lived together or those who knew other people in the town with whom they could share their social activities. It's so different, Nancy thought, from the way we imagined it would be! Last year there had been a group of four of them who did so many things together on campus and off campus, and of course there had been George, too. Now he was away on Army duty, like Bill and Jimmy. How do I go about making a life for myself outside of school, thought Nancy, all by myself?

• "Dear Mother and Daddy," the note said, "Please come to the second grade party on Wednesday at 2 o'clock at school. We will read to you from our new books. Love, Linda." Linda had written the note herself, in her best writing. Of course, her Grandma didn't call it writing, she said it was just printing, and why didn't they teach the kids to write in this school? Grandpa wasn't around very much, even at night, but when he did have time to talk to Linda, he always wanted to know what she was learning. Once she tried to tell him about going to the farm and making butter in school, but she wasn't going to tell him things like that again; all he said was, "What's the matter with that school? Just a lot of play stuff. And where's your homework? You must be pretty dumb if they don't give you times-tables to learn and reading to do at home." Linda looked at the note once more on the way home. Oh, well, guess she'd better just lose it. They wouldn't like it, anyway. Besides, she didn't have any mother and daddy, but Miss Gale didn't seem to remember that. Once Linda decided to write "Linda

Letton" on her papers, since Letton was her Grandpa's name; but the teacher just got upset and said her name was Linda Simons and that's what she should write. She loved Grandma and Grandpa, but sometimes it was hard, knowing you were supposed to have a Mother and Daddy to write notes to, and to tell about in sharing, and to be like the children in the reading books.

• Bill was a new student, a junior in a suburban high school. The counselor had sent for his parents, and they had been most cooperative about coming to school. But now their woes began to pour out: "We don't know why he acts like this, but this school is so different. So is the whole town. You say these friends of his are the kind that get into trouble, with their leather jackets and their hot rods. Maybe so, but we don't understand what kind of trouble. Sure, I know they drink beer. We serve it at our house. We believe in opening our house to the young kids, so they won't get into trouble on the streets. But last week the police chief came to the house and said we were a bad influence on the young people of the community, said he'd had lots of complaints from parents. Why? That's what we don't understand. . . We've always lived in the city, in an apartment. We've always been good people, hardworking and honest. We love our kids, get 'em everything they want, like television and nice clothes. Nobody ever bothered us in the city. We had our own friends, like us, and we had good times. But out here in the suburbs it's different, real different. . . We thought we'd like to own a little piece of land, have our own home, where the kids could bring their friends and where we could have our friends the way we wanted and mind our own business. But why are people so darned anxious to butt into our affairs? What's wrong with

drinking beer and having the kids come over to our house? Sure, they all got hot-rod cars. Bill earned money to get one for himself. Sure, they all park in front of our house, and on weekends it's midnight or later when they go home. But we're *with* the kids, we're not lettin' em run wild on the streets late at night. . . Maybe we should've stayed in the city, where people were either friendly or else they let you alone."

Strangers Can Be Resources

They come as strangers. . . Into every schoolroom in the country today, into every community and every state, into rural areas and into cities they come. These are real people, Danny and Nancy and Bill and the rest. They are the people we live with and work with and play with. There are hundreds of them. They are the individual differences we have always heard about in the form of real people.

How long has it been since you came as a stranger, too? How does it feel? What makes for strangeness and how do we handle it, both within ourselves and in those with whom we deal? It is our hope that this issue of the journal will stimulate thinking about such questions as these. They come as strangers. . . . What does it mean for us in education?

1. We must recognize these "strangers" and try to *feel with* them. (Empathy, sympathy, understanding, identification, respect, acceptance are big words!)

2. We must do some pretty straight thinking about values, our own personal values and social-class values and community values. (Can we have the courage to re-examine our own ways of thinking about what is important both in education and in people?)

3. We must find ways of using these "strangers" as resources in our commun-

ities and in our schools. (Are we missing some of the greatest opportunities for life enrichment by under-rating differences?)

4. We must bring our knowledge of social class right into our own teaching and learning situations, and we must continue to carry on studies of what social class differences and values mean in the lives of people, and in the education which we foster.

5. We must look again and again at how people learn—not just skills and knowledge, but attitudes and values and ways of living. We must remember that learning is at least threefold, thinking and doing and feeling, *wherever* we are and *whoever* we are, regardless of age or class or geographic location. What we know must be reflected in what we do.

6. We must use all the creativeness we can muster in recognizing and meeting particular needs of individuals, enthusiastically attempting ways of working and living that we have never tried before, if we are to reach those who come as strangers.

7. Finally, we must teach them, and meet them, with our hearts. Particularly in our classrooms must we open our hearts to all children and young people, giving of ourselves not the gifts that can be seen but the gifts that can only be felt. We must teach them with our hearts so these "strangers" can know that here, too, even in this strangeness, there is love-and-warmth which is everywhere the same. Teaching with our hearts should help each child to know that he has his own importance in the world, that he is somebody worth while. Then he can conquer the feeling of being a stranger, for when he has a sense of personal worth he begins also to feel at home, wherever he is.

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