The Teacher Helps Children

in Facing Change

An alert teacher can find opportunities in all phases of school and community living to foster security and confidence in children as together they face the fact of change.

A FRIENDLY mother and a teacher looked about an attractive fifth grade classroom in a residential suburb near a large Ohio city. School was over for the day and the last group of children had gone. The mother was commenting on the many evidences of interested learning on the part of the children. She quoted her own little daughter in the group as being fascinated by the study of housing needs in the adjacent city. A recent class trip to a settlement house in a slum area had stirred her deeply. She had taken an earnest part in making toys for the kindergarten children there. She had found accounts in books and magazines of outstanding housing developments in other parts of the country and had reported on these.

The mother paused in front of the map of the United States to which children had referred often during the social studies period that afternoon. "But you know, in spite of all this," the mother admitted to the teacher in a burst of confidence, "I can't seem to get over the idea that in order to be well-educated, a child should memorize the names of all the states and their capitals."

"I certainly respect your point of view," replied the teacher warmly. "Of course, children learn a lot of state capitals naturally as we study various problems of living in our country. And all of the children can use and interpret the map as they need to locate places. But to be sure that each child could name all the states and their capitals would require a lot of time. Which of the things we are doing do you think we could omit in order to find the time?"

The mother laughed. "You win," she agreed. "I wouldn't want Hazel to miss one little thing you've been doing. And, come to think of it, I doubt if I could give all those capitals now, myself, or even nearly all. And I spent many hours memorizing them!"

A Wholesome Attitude

Thus in the friendly give-and-take of good parent-teacher relationship, values were re-examined and new insights gained. The mother's mind was eased of the slight worry she had harbored in seeing the changes made in education. This kind of interchange between home and school is only one aspect of meeting change together. But, before going into others, let us look first at the reaction of children to change and at the possibilities for bringing about a wholesome, constructive attitude toward the changes taking place in our modern world.

At first thought, we might take it for granted that change is accepted easily...
by our children today. Certainly they are as enthusiastic as their elders about the multitude of new home appliances. They delight in the new cars and the super highways to accommodate them. They look forward to new inventions and can easily envision atomic-powered factories and heating. Their lively imaginations help them face with delicious anticipation the future exploration of outer space!

As children look back into history, they are impressed with the progress we have made in ways of living, in transportation, and, yes, in education. The fourth grade class that held a day of pioneer school complete with costumes was very glad to "return" to our modern school, just as the class that set up a pioneer home in the classroom saw the advantages of modern living. Children may speak rather boastfully of all the wonders of today. They are a bit nonplussed when someone suggests that what we have today will seem very old-fashioned in the future, but, when challenged, they like to look ahead to possibilities.

In spite of all the ready acceptance of many phases of change, children may feel a reluctance in other ways. Some may cling to the familiar ways of working, may fear new experiences, may be uneasy about the changes in education and in the social structure of the world about them. While much of this comes from the attitude of the adults in their world, some of the reluctance is also a natural part of personality development.

As children gain satisfaction from new experiences, they gain confidence in approaching other new ones. A new boy joined a group of very creative fifth graders. As they experimented with many art materials, he hung back and wanted to stay within the security of his own experience, which had been mostly with painting. However, with encouragement, he made a few trials with other materials. Within a few weeks he was going to the art room with anticipation. The joyous moment arrived when he was heard to say, "I'm glad we decided to use papier mâché for our animals, for I haven't tried that yet."

Thus the enriching experiences that have so many other values, also help children to meet new experiences with confidence. The new games played in physical education, the square dances and new musical instruments tried out in music, the experiments that are a part of science may all provide satisfying new experiences. Any help, or guidance, or activity that makes secure, well-balanced children, also contributes to security in meeting new experiences. The teacher who provides all this in her program is helping children to meet change.

As we take a look at the complex world of today, we see the tremendous need of people everywhere for skill in solving the problems that confront them. Many of the problems must be met by collective thinking resulting in productive action for the common good. We realize that our hope for ultimate world peace lies in the power of mankind to think through the world's problems and to come out with ever better solutions.

In the classroom, then, the teacher should guide her children to face and solve together the problems of daily living. Members of one class considered together how to protect their games on the playground from the deliberate interruptions of several of the boys. The discussion brought out the fact that the boys did not feel wanted in any of the groups and were getting even. The children ex-

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plained that they hadn’t been wanted because they hadn’t played fair or were poor sports. With understanding on both sides, the boys were assimilated into the play groups with benefit to the total group. Those few minutes of discussion not only solved the problem better than adult authority could have done, but gave the children many new insights into solving their own problems. Many such opportunities to develop better understanding arise in every classroom.

Personal Involvement

Children should be personally involved, as often as possible, in carrying out the solutions they can see to problems. A student council considered how it might deal with a mud puddle that was causing difficulty on the playground on rainy days. The suggestions were the usual ones of talking to the superintendent or to the head custodian. One boy said, “But all we need to do is to carry some of the gravel from back of the school building over to the mud puddle. We could do it ourselves.” Eagerly they secured permission and the use of a wheelbarrow and shovels. The other children watched enviously while the council members took direct action for playground improvement! Soon they met the problem of a trampled front lawn in a similarly direct manner. Children took turns helping to reseed the lawn under the direction of the superintendent of grounds, and the lawn became theirs to protect. Best of all, they had gained confidence in their ability to make improvements through concerted thought and action.

Opportunities often exist in a community for such problem solving; perhaps a vacant lot can be made into a playfield or a gully may need planting to prevent erosion. Conservation can involve everyone in some way. Water needs to be saved at home and at school; saving paper helps save our forests.

Children may also be involved richly in helping to bring about desirable change through such organizations as Junior Red Cross, Care, and many local movements for human betterment. The teacher has the responsibility of seeing that the children understand the significance of their efforts. They can also face the thought that some of these are but stop-gap measures in a world that is working toward better opportunities for all.

Again in the classroom, there are many needs for thinking together about better ways of doing the day’s work. “Why didn’t our groups work as well as we wished in the study of the problems of our west?” After the group of ten-year-olds had faced many possibilities together, a new work plan was evolved for the next unit. Smaller groups were formed. More careful outlines were made of the information wanted. Help was arranged for those who had difficulty locating material. All through and after the new unit, evaluation will continue. These children are learning to make changes, to search for ever better ways of working. This kind of thinking may be done in other areas too as in planning better ways to master spelling or to improve the correctness of writings.

Since our problem solving is done in a very real and busy world, children need equipment in terms of practical skills, of knowledge of the world around them, of understandings of people and happenings. They do need the three R’s and the ability to use them effectively. Never before has there been greater need for selective and critical reading. Never have we had greater need of substantial understandings of number concepts and the simple skills with numbers upon which to
build later technical and specialized skills. Certainly the ability to express ideas orally and in writing is of vast importance in the sharing of thought necessary to bring about effective change. We know that these skills are best learned in actual use in vital, interesting situations, but that children are also willing and eager, when they see the need, to give them additional purposeful practice. The teacher who makes this part of his program effective is also helping his children meet change.

The knowledge of the world about them comes to children in a variety of ways these days. The teacher can make use of television, radio, recordings, maps and a multitude of visual aids as well as books and real experience. The outside-of-school experiences contribute heavily too. The children need time to talk over and question the things they learn. School is no longer a place apart from life, but a place in which a better integration of experiences may be worked out. Children often clear up doubts and fears and worries through heart-to-heart discussions with an understanding teacher. The better understandings developed help children to face change.

Communities change and expand. Different nationalities or racial groups move in. Industrialization takes place where there was none before. The school has a definite responsibility to find added values in the change. Teachers can take the initiative in drawing out the cultural contributions of the new groups. Parents can be invited in to demonstrate cooking, colorful native dress, or customs.
gious groups can share in explaining to
one another the special holidays and cus-
toms of their religions. Mutual respect
can be built.

A trip to a new industry in a community
can make a big difference in the atti-
tude of children toward the workers there
and therefore toward their children. A
sixth grade class visited a mattress fac-
tory and was fascinated by the skill of a
woman who put the finishing touches on
a beautiful mattress. Their respect for
her was tremendous. In their discussion
they brought out that many others had
worked hard to get the mattress ready
for those final touches. Another group
agreed, after a trip to a drug manufac-
turing company, that the workers there
had an important part in the curing of
illnesses.

Thus in many ways an alert, creative
teacher can find opportunities in all
phases of school and community living
for meeting change effectively. A study
of Mexico may be an ordinary study of
life there as reflected in the usual book
accounts, or it can become a vital study
of change as seen through the “Each
one teach one” program as related to the
whole plan for better education and the
better economic development of Mexico.
A study of Canada will surely include the
changes that have led to the building of
the St. Lawrence Seaway and the proba-
ble results of its completion. Children
old enough to study Africa and Asia will
be thrilled with the story of the awaken-
ing among the peoples there. They can
look soberly at some phases of the prob-
lems involved. They can study the part
played by the United Nations. While the
study should not go beyond their depth
of understanding—still it should not be
superficial and condescending, as many
such studies have been in the past. Al-
most any study, any area of school work
will yield opportunities for the teacher
who, herself, is always looking for better
ways.

“But,” a reader may inquire, “how can
a teacher alone make much headway? Her
efforts are but a drop in the bucket.
Even if she succeeds in helping the chil-
dren in her group to be more forward-
looking, to learn to solve problems effec-
tively, to be alert to the significance of
change, how can she get her community
started in those directions?” Let us take
a look at a real situation for a few
moments.

Relating to the Community

Four fifth-grade rooms in a suburban
elementary school were brightly lighted
on a November evening. Parents of the
fifth-grade pupils streamed into the
building and to the classrooms. They
looked about their own child’s room,
greeted the teacher, and chatted with
other parents about the materials and
work in evidence. Then they found places
to sit while the teacher explained her
aims and hopes for their children for the
year in progress. Questions and discus-
sion were welcomed. Approval of the
modern program was apparent. Enthusi-
amism was kindled for the vital, forward-
looking ideas expressed. An understand-
ing spirit prevailed.

The meeting just described is but one
of a series. Each grade level meets in
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The meeting just described is but one
of a series. Each grade level meets in
the same manner, as has been the custom
for several years. After the meetings in
individual classrooms, the parents meet
together in the auditorium. At this par-
ticular time slides of the activities of the
special areas were shown. One other
year, parents saw slides showing their
own children engaged in the activities of
the reading program. Educational movies,
travel talks or panel discussions have
been used at various times. Somewhere
in the evening, as planned by teachers and the room mothers of each group, there is a social hour. This fall meeting is the favorite of both parents and teachers—a common meeting ground for sharing understandings.

A few teachers, years before, had experimented with the fall meetings. Their success helped the plan grow to include all and to become a powerful force in the community. Likewise evaluation letters sent home instead of “grades” began with notes sent by individual teachers to supplement letter grades. A long period of staff study and change also incorporated into the reporting system the conferences with parents with which individual teachers had experimented on their own time. Most administrators are eager to make use of real teacher initiative and growth and to help through staff planning to give it more force and direction.

Teachers in the school described also feel free to work with parents in any way that will be helpful. There have been craft periods, manuscript writing demonstrations, sessions for making costumes, workshops for preparing educational materials, studies done with parents as to home uses of arithmetic or the evaluation of comic books. Parents help with class trips, take part in P.T.A. fund raising for school needs, come to summaries of units of study, or to square dancing sessions. School and community have a good working relationship. Groups of parents interested in a study of juvenile problems or of traffic hazards turn naturally to the school for help or leadership, just as the school turns to parents whenever needed. There have, of course, been differences through the years, but they have been resolved through cooperative effort. The possibilities for change in this community are tremendous. New problems, as they arise, can be worked out together.

Such a relationship does not just happen, of course. The teacher and the school must move only as rapidly in any kind of change as they are able to get the community to accept. Serious differences between school and home would be frustrating to the children. Changes should not be abrupt and revolutionary but planned carefully and worked out in easy stages. Establish two-way communication with the homes in a variety of ways. Evaluate with children so that they may see the value of their achievements. Involve the parents in school projects and, in turn, take part in those of the community. School and community should change together and the school is usually the leader.

With this kind of development taking place increasingly, the individual teacher need not despair. The efforts of many in many places can be a mighty force. We all know that change today is more rapid than it has been at any time in history. Teachers have a tremendous challenge to help children in facing change.