The Consultant Helps Teachers
In Meeting Social Change

The consultant needs to help teachers see the different kind of world that is in process of developing, and to help them show children how to make the most of it.

“How this school neighborhood has changed!” thought Miss Byers as she backed her car into a convenient parking spot near Smithton Elementary School. Time was when serving as consultant to the Smithton faculty meant working in a school attended by children of moderately prosperous businessmen of the thriving young city. While the boys and girls had been healthy, active children who got into the usual scrapes and gave their teachers a certain amount of trouble in academic matters, they had generally reflected stable homes and the security of good parental supervision. They were children who did things with their families, and who had many experiences that gave them background for their school activities.

Now, however, many of the larger houses had been made over into second-rate apartments, and small business establishments and apartments seemed to fill every other available space. People moved in and out of this semi-downtown area frequently, and many of the children who attended Smithton School were transients who had been in as many as six or seven schools in their short careers. Most of the families lived on the proverbial shoestring. Oftentimes there had been a divorce or a separation, and a working mother was the sole support of the family. In many cases, both parents worked, and children of almost all these families went home to empty houses after school. Working parents were tired by evening, and often had neither the time nor the energy to answer questions, to talk things through with the children, or to do things with them in the way that is so important for good parent-child relations and for the development of children who will grow into responsible adulthood.

It made teaching difficult, too, as Miss Byers well knew. That was the specific reason for her visit that day. The principal had called her, saying that it seemed to be increasingly difficult for the teachers to do the things prescribed by the district for boys and girls of given age levels. Many of the books and other materials seemed difficult or not well suited to the experiences of the children, and control problems were cropping up even in the best teachers’ rooms. Mrs. Green wanted Miss Byers to come out and talk over the situation to see what could be done.

A Good Relationship

As Miss Byers and Mrs. Green began their discussion, it became evident that the principal had already thought through many phases of the problem, and had isolated some of the factors. She knew the school community rather well, was per-
sonally acquainted with some of the families through the P.T.A. and other contacts, and knew most of the children in the school. She was very familiar with the school curriculum, and had helped many of the teachers with teaching techniques as well as with materials. Also, she was working closely with the staff on special control problems, and in that way was getting a better knowledge of some of the underlying reasons for concern.

It was apparent that there was a good working relationship between the two. The consultant was considered a friend and a helper, but also as one who had special knowledges because of training and experience. Miss Byers saw the situation at Smithton School as one aspect of a larger district concern brought on partly by the complexity of today’s world. Other schools in different neighborhoods had problems also, but of course they were not identical. Home situations and living conditions varied, but running through all seemed to be a current of social change. It was a change that was affecting the whole social culture, and this problem at Smithton seemed to be one expression of that. Even though Miss Byers sensed this larger aspect of the problem, she was still concerned with the local school’s situation as presented by the principal.

Mrs. Green was a sincere, hardworking person who nevertheless had a good sense of humor and a likeable personality. The problem she voiced was not hers alone, but was also that of the staff. It was a mixed group, of course, some having had several years of experience, some new to teaching that year, and some in their second or third years. Some saw the problem with more insight than others; some almost closed their eyes to it and tried to teach subjects to children regardless of the ability or experience of the boys and girls concerned. Whatever plan was followed, both principal and consultant knew, would need to have several facets in order to be of help to the various teachers in a way that would carry them all on together toward a common goal.

At this first conference, the consultant listened, asked questions, suggested points to be considered, and discussed with the principal incidents that seemed to illustrate the main points of the problem. Together, they tried to analyze the factors inherent in the situation, to think of possible ways of proceeding, and to map next steps.

Several points were agreed on. As soon as possible, the principal would arrange a meeting of the faculty and the consultant, at which time the teachers would have an opportunity to bring up their special concerns and be able to discuss them at some length. The principal would do some preliminary work on this, for sometimes teachers are reluctant to speak in a general meeting. Past experience with this faculty had been good, however, and the situation could be planned so that it would be productive. For one thing, because of this preliminary briefing, the consultant could come with some definite possibilities to suggest in the way of teaching techniques, available materials, and new ideas to try. She would be better able to build on what the teachers were already doing, to ask questions that would help point up the real problems, and to foresee how various suggestions might be accepted by the teachers.

Following a suggestion by the consultant, the principal decided she should ask for more specialized help from the

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guidance department of the school district. While she had already been using the workers from this office, she had not realized all of the various kinds of assistance they could provide. She would talk with the school librarian, too, to alert her to the special reading needs of the children of Smithton School. She would urge the teachers to take advantage of the child study opportunities provided by the district, and would help them have more conferences with parents on special problems. She herself would work more closely with teachers on behavior problems, trying to help boys and girls see the reasons for rules and assisting them in working out solutions to difficulties. She would make an effort to become better acquainted with both children and parents, and thus be in a position to be of greater assistance to the teachers.

**Available Resources**

The consultant agreed to talk with the head of the curriculum department to see what variations were possible within the limits of the prescribed curriculum, and to see whether more varied materials were available. She would look at the audio-visual catalog, and try to make up a worksheet of especially helpful pictures and films for the Smithton classes. This would probably involve visiting the audio-visual department and previewing some of the listings. Since she did not use the materials with classes herself, Miss Byers was not personally familiar with all of them.

She thought she remembered an article in a recent professional magazine that would give some help; so she agreed to visit the teachers’ library to see what she could find. Also, just a week ago she had heard a talk by a consultant from another county which described a project they were carrying on to develop a better program for children of migrant workers. Perhaps the written account of that project would give some leads in the problems of Smithton School. After all, the mobility of the families was one factor. Some of the teachers might be interested, also, although in her interest of saving teacher time it was probably better for Miss Byers or Mrs. Green to summarize such information for them.

Together, Miss Byers and Mrs. Green set up several days when the consultant would come to Smithton School to work with the teachers. Because of the good relationship, most of them would want to have the consultant visit in their classrooms before conferences. After visiting, Miss Byers would be able to make more pertinent suggestions that would fit particular problems and concerns. In some cases, grade level meetings would probably be requested, for much had been accomplished in that way in the past. Probably, too, there would be after-hours “bull-sessions” participated in by several of Smithton’s teachers and the principal and consultant. They had done this in the past when other teaching problems had presented themselves.

As Miss Byers left the school that morning, she felt that they were on their way toward a better solution to some of the practical problems of Smithton School. It was going to be a great deal of work, but it would be satisfying, too, she hoped. Working with a principal like Mrs. Green was a pleasure. She was aware of what was happening in her school and anxious to do something about it. Principal, teachers and consultant would work on the problem together, learning from each other and gaining much through group stimulation and cooperation.

Miss Byers reflected, as she drove back to her office, on the differences between individual principals with whom she had
worked as consultant. Even now, some of the schools to which she was assigned had pressing problems similar to those of Smithton, but Miss Byers could not seem to get those principals to see the difficulties. What was she to do? Working on call as she did, it was sometimes hard to get into a school. Perhaps she should look again at the teacher rosters in those schools. There might be some who could help with district in-service meetings, or who could teach observation lessons for new teachers or for individuals needing help on specific problems. That would be a way of getting in to talk with teachers, at least. Building up a good rapport might help on the other, larger problem. In any case, she would call those principals who did not ask for much help and mention special meetings coming up that they or their teachers might find profitable. Maybe they needed a little more attention or gentle prodding from her.

And thinking of in-service meetings brought Miss Byers back to the problems of Smithton School. Perhaps that was another avenue for helping the Smithton teachers. She would look at the district-wide program as soon as she got back to her office to see whether there were any particularly pertinent offerings. If there were, she would want to be sure the Smithton faculty knew about them. It might be, too, that some special meetings could be planned, for other schools in the district had many of the same problems. There might be outside resource people who could be brought in, next year, if the budget did not permit the expenditure this year. This would be a long-range project, of course, for problems of this sort were not solved in a few short weeks or months.

Yes, this was going to mean much hard work. Miss Byers could not yet see all the problems and possibilities for action that were involved. However, she knew that part of her job was to help teachers work out solutions in cooperation with others. She knew that helping teachers to understand and know how best to teach their children meant helping teachers understand themselves. It meant learning about conflicting value patterns and knowing how to accept and raise to a higher level the ways of living of the less fortunate children who come to school. It meant somehow helping teachers to see the different kind of world that is in the process of developing, and helping them to show children how to make the most of it. It would be a big job, but the possible results were worth a good honest try.