

Methods and Results in a Junior High Core Class

How effective is the junior high school in fostering experimentation and exploration; in stressing guidance and problem solving techniques; in meeting needs, interests and problems of young people?

MUCH HAS BEEN said and written about the purposes of the junior high school. What are these purposes? Are they preparation for life or meeting needs and interests and solving problems in the lives of the youngsters here and now? Are they to prepare youngsters for the increasing specialization of the senior high school and college? If so, is this a primary or secondary goal?

These are some of the big questions in education. However, it is the belief of the author that the primary purpose of education in the junior high, as in all grade levels, is education for citizenship. Education for citizenship demands the development of the basic skills as well as learning and continual experience in social skills. The basic skills are the arts needed for a literate citizenry, and the social skills are those needed for living in a democratic school-community and nation. The core program is a means of achieving these ends.

Underlying Philosophy

Recently the author made a study of the teaching methods employed in and the learning experiences and outcomes of a three-year junior high school core program. Underlying this program were the

general purposes just described. In addition to these general concepts, guidance was stressed because it was felt that teaching and guidance could not and should not be separated. It was concluded that if the ends sought were literate, mature and well-adjusted citizens, then consideration of the problems of youth could not be ignored.¹

Subject matter was not stressed as an end in itself nor was the acquisition of factual knowledge. The pursuance of these was considered a means of achieving proficiency in the basic and social skills. Of paramount importance was the concept that the junior high school should serve as a period of experimentation and exploration for the student.² To facilitate this, students were encouraged to follow their hobbies and to develop new ones. One portion of the school day was given over to an interest period which was dedicated almost exclusively to this purpose.

¹ Joseph C. Jurjevich, Jr. "Learning Experiences and Outcomes of a Three-Year Junior High School Core Program." Doctoral dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1956.

² William T. Gruha and Harl C. Douglass. *The Modern Junior High School*. New York: Ronald Press, 1947, p. 59.

Implementation

As an aid to guidance, teacher-imposed discipline, homework and examinations were de-emphasized. Final examinations were not given at all. When a quiz was given, it was primarily for the students' information—for their evaluation of their abilities and shortcomings. Everything that could be done was done to reduce tensions. This was considered essential to the creation of a permissive atmosphere in which the students felt free to probe and question and to discuss personal problems as well as those common to the group. As an aid to stimulating thought and creating problem-solving situations, answers were rarely given to questions asked of the teacher. Students were encouraged to use means of their own making to find answers to their queries.

Since a good guidance program was considered basic to the entire endeavor, a concerted effort was made to help these youngsters with their problems. It was felt that a recognition and attempted solution of these problems were necessary before other learnings could be effected.

In dealing with the problems of the group under study, open discussion of these common concerns was the method most often used. Sometimes a panel of "experts" selected by the class was used to discuss and to give opinions on the personal problems of individual students who cared to disclose them. It was felt that peer-group opinion was effective as an aid to a student's adjustment to his difficulty. There was wide use of bibliography. Oral reports of books which dealt with the troubles of young people were used as the basis for discussions of such troubles. In the ninth-grade core an experimental edition of a compilation of

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such reading materials by De Boer and others was used to aid students in finding the kinds of books they wanted to read.³

In addition to the previously mentioned methods of dealing with adolescent problems, the group developed personality charts. These charts included those traits which members of the study group felt were necessary in a mature, well-adjusted, and well-liked junior high student. They rated themselves daily on these instruments for a month at a time to get some idea of how they, in their own opinion, fitted the pattern of an ideal personality which they and their peers had created.

Sociodrama was used extensively in creating learning experiences. Students practiced meeting people in all kinds of social settings, as well as introducing themselves and others in a variety of situations. It was felt that sociodrama had a cathartic value as well. Class members dramatized a pupil complaining to a teacher, to the principal, and acted out situations in which two or more students discussed things they liked and did not like about the school.

The educational leader of the group under study felt that individualized instruction demanded that the opportunities for participation in class activities be made available to all on an equal basis. It was his opinion that leadership is a learned response and opportunities for experiencing it should be shared equally. It was also felt that students should have the opportunity to perform

³ John J. De Boer and others. *Index to Reading Material for Use in Human Relations Programs in Secondary Schools*. Experimental Edition. Sponsored by the Illinois Secondary School Curriculum Program, 1951.

in any area of ability. This gave students the experience needed for further development of the skill while giving them status and recognition with their peers. For these reasons class offices were rotated monthly until everyone had an opportunity to serve in a position of leadership and individuals with special and/or exceptional abilities were encouraged in furthering them.

All of the activities and concepts described thus far served the specific purposes of aiding the student with his problems, establishing rapport in the classroom, and contributing to the creation of the permissiveness needed for effective pupil-teacher planning and problem-solving situations.

The essence of classroom procedure was the attempt to be consistent in the use of democratic methods and to work in the areas of student needs, interests and problems in a context of social realities. The scope and sequence of study were established by staff planning. Within the limits set by the broad problem areas of study which made up the scope and sequence, the units of work undertaken by the group were the results of pupil-teacher planning. This cooperative planning initiated studies, and group methods and problem-solving techniques were used whenever and wherever possible. In group situations the students were observed to see if they participated in the discussions, criticized positively and negatively the contributions of others, accepted the same kinds of criticism of their own ideas, were flexible in the give and take of discussion, and accepted a just share of responsibility in carrying out a mutually agreed upon objective. It was felt that the group process which incorporated these activities was the democratic process.

Problem-solving experiences were ex-

plored by helping students question their usual thought patterns, creating doubt and confusion concerning accepted beliefs and modes of behavior.⁴ These conditions were developed sometimes by questioning inferences which the students had accepted in reaching conclusions. At other times problem-solving situations were developed by stating broad generalities and platitudes as absolutes or dogma. In all of these instances the students were forced to define the problem, to gather all of the information they could concerning it, and then to analyze and criticize what had been found. Finally, there was an attempt to draw some conclusions as to the validity of the original statement or assumptions.

Control in the classroom is an ever-present problem. The educational leader of this group wanted to avoid the impression that this was a teacher-dominated classroom since he wanted to use and to be consistent in the use of democratic methods. Moreover, it was felt that the situation offered an excellent opportunity for the creation of a political science laboratory and the employment of the method of intelligence as a means of solving a common problem. Through the use of pupil-teacher planning and group discussions there evolved a room constitution which spelled out the duties, rights and privileges of all class members. A court was set up for the enforcement of the agreement. All of this, of course, was done within the limits of the rules and regulations established by the Board of Education and the school's administration.⁵

⁴ Harold Alberty. *Reorganizing the High-School Curriculum*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948, p. 53.

⁵ Joseph C. Jurjevich, Jr. "An Experiment in Self-Government." *Social Education* XVI (1952), 375-76.

Responsibility in the Subject Areas

The broad problem areas of work in the scope and sequence of study replaced the use of "the textbook for the course" in social studies. These problem areas were so broad and general as to allow a great deal of freedom in pupil-teacher planning. Extensive use was made of books, magazines, newspapers, encyclopedias, field trips, interviews, and any community resource which could throw light on the topic being discussed and investigated by the class. A great deal of emphasis was placed on the learning of the social skills needed for effective democratic and interpersonal relations. Equally important was an attempt to meet the felt needs, interests and problems of the students. It was thought that the development of social skills was meeting the needs defined as lacks.

In the area of language arts the core teacher felt responsible for helping development of skills of reading, writing, speaking, spelling, vocabulary and listening. In all instances the teacher's purpose in creating learning experiences was to develop these basic skills and the social skills in meaningful situations which had student interest and purpose as motivating factors.

In each unit of work requiring research, the students read widely in their quest for information pertinent to the topic. They were also encouraged to read according to their interests and problems and to broaden their interests in reading. The class read poems, stories, and plays and dramatized some of these readings in an effort to promote aesthetic appreciation.

The development of the skills of writing and speaking was sought through the same means and activities as the other skills. In examining the writings of

the students, the teacher looked for improved legibility and spelling, as well as the ability of clear and precise expression. Writing also had cathartic value for students when they were asked and encouraged to express themselves on topics of their own choice. To aid them in speaking more effectively, students were often asked to make oral reports to the class concerning their research and to participate in the reading of stories, poems and plays. When they desired, they were asked to read material of their own composition. Above all, each student had the responsibility to make himself understood by everyone who heard him. It was standard operating procedure for the student to ask for positive and negative criticism from the class after making a report. Opportunities to speak before audiences other than their own classmates were also provided through such activities as making announcements before other classes, seeking information from other classes, and presenting an original play in an assembly program before the entire student body.

Although there was no text per se for the social studies, there was a standard text used for language. The preponderance of grammatical errors in the written reports of students served as the basis for formalized grammar study and drill. These reports also furnished the beginnings of the spelling lists which were made up of students' errors in spelling. Words for this list were also selected from what was read. The teacher's reasoning behind such action was that if boys and girls were to learn to spell, they should first learn to spell correctly words they were using. The selection of words from the class's reading matter for the spelling list was based on the idea that all areas of study have a vocabulary which is peculiar to that area. If one

expects to be knowledgeable in an area of specialization, he must know the vocabulary of that particular field. These spelling lists grew to 300 or 400 words each year and the students were required to know the meanings as well.

The only means of evaluating pupils' progress in listening was by an occasional inspection of their notebooks. The teacher looked for a manifestation of the ability to condense and summarize what was heard in class.

Results of the Study

The group under study in the core program described in this article was not a select one. It was heterogeneous in ability, and the mean IQ was slightly below the test norm.

Evaluation of the learning outcomes of the study group was made through comparisons of mean grade level achievement on standardized tests. The achievement of the study group was compared with that of other homerooms of the same grade level in all of the city schools. Comparisons were also made of their achievement concerning academic and citizenship honor rolls, attendance, tardiness, failures, drop-outs, honors received, and participation in sports and other co-curricular activities. An attempt was made to compare teaching procedures as well. A modal teaching procedure was established for each of the three years of the group's junior high experience. This was done because all of the junior high classes were operating within the framework of a core curriculum concept. The methods used by the teacher of the study group were much less conservative than those used by the other teachers of the same grade level.

An evaluation was made for each year the study group was in the junior high. This involved eleven other classes of each

grade level in the city. A follow-up study was made for two and one-half years of the senior high school experience of twenty-five students who were in the ninth-grade core class under study. Here their achievements were compared to those of the entire sophomore, junior, and senior classes and, in some cases, they were compared with those of the entire senior high school population.

From the comparisons in the junior high school, it was concluded that the study group's academic and social achievement were as good as, and in most instances better than, the mean achievement of all classes in their particular grade level of the school and city. From the evidence of the follow-up study in senior high school, one could conclude that the study group's junior high school experience was as good as, or slightly better than, that which the average class in the city had had. The results of testing in the junior year of senior high school showed the mean IQ of the group under study to be more than six points below the test norm. However, their mean achievement in academic areas was slightly above that of the entire junior class. Their achievement in social and school citizenship activities was usually up to or slightly above the average of all of the students in their class and school.

The findings of this study seem to support the contention that the junior high school can be used for a period of experimentation and exploration, stressing guidance and problem-solving techniques, and attempting to meet the needs, interests and problems of youth. It seems apparent that the study group suffered no ill effects in their academic achievements in senior high school as a result of their junior high school experience. Their achievement socially seems to indicate the same results.

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