

Classroom Projects Can Improve Teaching

When teachers begin to ask fundamental questions about their teaching, they may find, as did the staff in this report, that research in the classroom can furnish sound answers.

JUST WHEN should elementary school children begin creative writing? Is third grade the proper place to learn the Dewey Decimal Classification of books? How do "nine-year-olds" spend their leisure time? These, and other questions, were asked by a group of elementary school teachers at the start of a year-long program of curriculum improvement in their school.

The administrative and supervisory staff of the Dade County (Miami, Florida) public school system believe that instruction can best be improved by faculties working together, at the local school level, under the leadership of the principal. All new schools are expected, therefore, in their second year of existence, to critically appraise their program in a year-long evaluative self-study.

At the beginning of the year, the staff of the David Fairchild Elementary School set up its plans. These developed into three main areas. First of all, staff members wanted to know whether theirs was a good school. Therefore, evaluative criteria and techniques were studied. Second, the faculty wanted to

know more about their students and their community. A comprehensive pupil personnel study was made. Third, the staff wanted to improve the level of instruction throughout the school. Individual projects were suggested, projects which could develop along the lines of personal interest and which could ultimately be shared with the entire faculty. These turned out to be a most stimulating and practical phase of the self-study.

An Individualized Reading Program

A fifth grade teacher had been teaching for several years with the usual three groups. Teacher's manuals were used as guides for planning instruction. Most children progressed well, but there always remained a few cases of reading difficulty. An article in *Educational Leadership*¹ inspired this teacher to experiment with an individualized program in his class. A collection of books at various levels of difficulty and interest was assembled. The assistance of the librarian and the principal was solicited. Each student was guided to read daily according to his interests. Notebooks were kept for purposes of recording prog-

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¹ Phyllis Parkin. "An Individual Program of Reading." *Educational Leadership* 14:34-38, October 1956.

ress with vocabulary, understanding, and amount of material read. Various activities, such as reports, skits, poster-making, and plays were also employed. Each day during the reading period the teacher held individual conferences with several students, going over their notebooks, discussing the stories that had been read, helping with difficulties, and guiding future progress.

Evaluation at the end of a three month period showed that a majority of the class were comfortably reading books at least one level higher than when they started. The average number of books read was 25, ranging from a low of 10 to a high of 50 books per pupil. Interest in reading increased, especially with the slow readers. The teacher was enthusiastic about the progress of the class and made plans to continue the program indefinitely.

Fourth Graders Study the Library

The school librarian was concerned about the wisdom of a curriculum guide which recommended that third graders be taught the Dewey Decimal Classification system. She felt that learning a numerical classification of books placed too great a burden on children at a time when they were just beginning to read independently.

For her project she decided to go even a grade level higher to see if fourth graders were ready to learn and use this information. Two months were allocated for the trial period. The class selected for the experiment met in the library once a week for a 40-minute lesson. The classroom teacher participated in follow-up work, bringing out the proper classification of books as they were used in the classroom. Not more than two classifications of books were ever introduced at one time. Lectures, discussions,

film strips, and other techniques were employed in teaching the lessons. Frequent reviews were held. Some classifications, such as the 100 group, dealing with philosophy, for which children would have little use, were merely mentioned in passing. Frequent reference was made to classification charts. During library periods each child determined the classification of the book that was borrowed.

Evaluation of the study was made by means of personal observation of the children as they used the library and by means of written tests. Most of the children found it difficult to distinguish between certain classes of books, such as general and applied science. They remembered best those classes of books which they personally liked, such as biography or sports. The librarian found that the children did acquire a more definite understanding of the arrangement of the library, and were able to draw a lay-out sketch with ease. Since the classifications they knew best were those that were most popular, it was still questionable whether or not the direct teaching was particularly effective. She felt that the time spent teaching the classification system would have been better spent satisfying the needs arising out of the children's interest in the library.

Television Viewing

Several teachers were interested in the leisure time activities of students. Questionnaires and diaries were used to collect data. Watching television turned out to be the major out-of-school activity (if it can be called an activity) for 65 third and fourth graders. The greatest amount of time spent was 28 hours per week by a fourth grader and 26½ hours by a third grader. Only one student stated that he

did not watch television at all. The average viewing time for fourth graders was 15 hours a week. Every home owned at least one television set.

In addition to television, almost every child listed several other outside interests, such as model building, collecting things, playing with dolls, pets, and reading. A few third graders listed reading as an outside interest, while with fourth graders it took third place right after models and dolls, and pets. The average amount of time spent reading after school by the fourth graders was 3 hours a week, with a high of 8½ hours and a low of zero hours.

The average time spent doing homework was 1.8 hours per week. The greatest amount of time, 4½ hours, was spent by the weakest student. Interestingly, it was the average students, rather than the best, who spent the least time on their homework.

The teachers concluded that their students spent a wholesome amount of leisure time in worthwhile activities for their age, even though watching television was without a doubt the favorite.

Progress in a Combination-Grade Classroom

Another teacher attempted to ascertain the amount of progress made by pupils in a combination fifth and sixth grade classroom. A group of parents had protested vociferously in September when an unexpected increase in enrollment had necessitated the formation of this group. Since it was a departure from the usual class organization, these parents thought it would be harmful to their children and retard their progress. Even a few of the staff members were dubious about this combination, their previous experience having been limited to a single-grade room.

The teacher felt that this situation provided a natural project for study and evaluation.

The fifth grade group consisted of 19 children who had been selected for their ability to learn rapidly. The sixth grade group was made up of good solid learners who were normal, well adjusted girls and boys.

In September the fifth graders were administered the Metropolitan Achievement Tests, form S, and the sixth graders form V. Results were recorded so that comparisons could be made later.

Over a five-month period these children worked and learned together. Some subjects, such as reading, music, art, and arithmetic were taught to the class as one unit. Others, such as social studies, were taught separately. The teacher found it difficult to think of the group as two separate grades. For the parents' sake, their identities were kept separate.

In February, after a five month period of instruction, the two groups were again tested, this time with another form of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests. Average gains in the fifth grade group ranged from five months in spelling to 15 months in reading. The sixth graders did even better, with average gains of nine months in spelling and 23 months in reading. Other subjects were comparable. The teacher concluded that there were no adverse effects from combining a fifth and sixth grade class. She felt that the sixth graders were stimulated to greater effort by being put on their mettle with a bright group of fifth graders. Teaching the class was an exciting, challenging experience.

Creative Writing in First Grade

A first grade teacher wanted to find out whether creative writing could be introduced in the first semester of the

first year. She wondered what would be the best way to inspire children to do writing that meant something. How much carry-over would there be into reading? Would such a project have value? She attempted to find out by carrying on a daily creative writing period with her first graders for a trial period of one month.

On the first day she was interrupted by a constant stream of "how-do-you-spells?" although no stress had been put on spelling or punctuation. Only 21 out of 27 papers came in. On the second day each student kept a notebook to record key words. Everyone turned in a paper. On the third day writing time decreased 50 per cent when Anne, a rather timid child, volunteered to help with the spelling. By the fifth day another student, Linda, also offered to help, which reduced the writing time still further.

The teacher evaluated results at the end of a month. From a strictly mechanical standpoint the appearance of the writing had improved and the length of the compositions increased. Better still, the children were much more "alive" and interested in word study activities than had been usual in other years. The children also improved in their ability to express ideas. One interesting composition stated, "My father had a birthday. He was 80. The queer part is, he doesn't look half that age to me!"

Other Projects, Too

A number of other studies and projects were carried on in the course of the year. The physical education teacher

gave the Kraus-Weber tests for muscular fitness to 116 sixth graders, and then planned a special program of instruction to remedy two areas of physical weakness which he found. A fourth grade teacher experimented with sociograms throughout the year, using results as a guide for setting up committees, study groups, play groups, and making job assignments. Other teachers worked on projects such as an information folder for substitute teachers, a resource file of parents with special abilities, and special resource units adapted to Florida teaching.

Many Results

Each teacher wrote up her project and mimeographed copies for the rest of the staff. Several meetings were also set up for discussing the projects. A stimulating cross-pollination of ideas and techniques took place. Staff members were impressed by the wealth of talent and ability within their own group. An increased feeling of mutual respect developed. Instruction improved throughout the school, as it always does when teachers are concerned with what they are doing. When plans were made for the following year the staff unanimously agreed to have more "do-it-yourself" projects.

The real value of these projects lay, not in the depth of their findings, which were hardly of cosmic significance, but in the continuing attitude of experimentation which developed as the faculty worked cooperatively to improve instruction in their own school.

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