

Together We Define Purposes

MUCH of what has been written in education in recent years establishes the desirability of involving children and youth in the planning of the school experiences. Some of our beliefs about working with children in the teaching-learning process are that an individual:

1. Learns as a whole
2. Is in a constant process of change
3. Is motivated by a drive for self-enhancement
4. Behaves in accordance with his self-perception
5. Learns best what has meaning and purpose for him
6. Is led to self-commitment and self-direction by the internalization of goals
7. Works best in an atmosphere of acceptance
8. Is more productive if he is able to accept himself and others
9. Learns to value democratic purposes through democratic methods.

These and other assumptions provide the framework, then, for classroom practices.

Planning Activities

Students in one eighth grade core class were invited to participate in planning their learning activities for the school

Eighth grade students experience growth as they, with their teacher, accept responsibility for planning, following through and evaluating their activities.

year. Each was asked (a) what kind of person he would like to be, and (b) what skills and knowledge he believed were essential for him during and by the end of the eighth grade. During class discussion the teacher wrote the students' ideas on the board while the secretary recorded them in the class notebook.

Proponents of each idea met with other interested persons to look further at possible content and activities. Brief reports of their recommendations were given to the class. The group established some criteria for deciding which suggestions seemed to be most valuable:

1. Will the knowledge and experiences be useful?

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2. Will the knowledge and experiences increase our understanding of democracy?

3. Will the knowledge and experiences be of interest to everyone?

4. Are there adequate resource persons and materials available?

After deliberation, it was decided that the group goals for the year would include:

1. Learning about ourselves as adolescents

2. Increasing our skills in communication (speaking, listening, reading, writing to include spelling)

3. Increasing our knowledge of America's history

4. Learning what the bases are of American democracy

5. Increasing in appreciation of and skill in sports, both as spectator and as participant

6. Learning to control emotions, develop poise

7. Learning better interviewing techniques and telephone courtesy

8. Learning more about world problems as they relate to the United States.

It was suggested next that a priority order be established. The consensus was, however, that all of the goals were important, and that if time and activities were planned thoughtfully, the students would be able to deal in some manner with all of them during the year. It became obvious that some of the goals were continuing and would become a part of almost every activity, but others, such as American history, would lend themselves to more organized study.

These teen-agers began by learning about themselves. They also agreed to spend a half-hour three days per week reading for pleasure; one hour two days per week investigating current issues in the news. Other activities for which time was budgeted were daily business,

student government discussions, and specific skill development. For example, various students found it necessary to gain further mastery of interviewing techniques, letter forms, use of the dictionary, outlining procedures, and formation of plurals. This left the major part of the two periods for more focused work on the general problem.

Each day, or as often as necessary, the total group, small groups, or individuals made plans for action. Almost every day an agenda was built. Occasionally the teacher asked the class what needed to be done that day. Sometimes she listed items which had been agreed upon and asked the class to establish priority. At times an individual volunteered to propose agenda items subject to class approval. Often the needs of the ongoing work committee determined the schedule.

In addition to the group planning, an opportunity was provided for students to make individual commitments. On occasion the teacher listed the major tasks of the day across the board and invited students to sign up. At times commitments were made orally. Sometimes pupils wrote out an individual plan for action. Each plan included the nature of the task, with whom it was to be executed (sometimes alone, of course), the activities involved, the materials needed, the amount of time necessary. To the teacher this individual pupil planning seemed time very profitably spent, for she was then able to serve as resource person, guide, challenger. When a student needed help to budget time, to find materials, and the like, the teacher was free to assist. Then the boy or girl was off on his own again, his steps clear.

As the year progressed, the third goal, "increasing our knowledge of America's

history," became the major problem area. In this classroom, as in all others in the school, there were copies of many texts and other reference materials. To illustrate, these students made use of 20 different texts ranging from 5th to 12th grade levels. The school library furnished numerous other books. Since some pupils needed help in locating and recording the main ideas in their reading, time was set aside that week to develop these specific skills. Issues of the *Read* magazine were particularly helpful as they were focusing on outlining skills during this time. Students practiced outlining their historical references which then were evaluated by student and teacher. As some gained competence, they began to look for other ways of recording information, although some preferred the outline.

During the study of American history, a discussion of some of the issues debated by the authors of the U. S. Constitution took an unusual turn. The group decided to set up a hypothetical "colony" on another planet and to write a constitution. Since the students in the class would be the first inhabitants, their values would determine the laws of the group. Each person, including the teacher, was to think over very carefully and to write down as clearly as possible what he considered his major values in life. These stated values were compiled by a committee of three chosen by the group. Later individuals volunteered to work on committees to investigate and to clarify social, religious, economic and political beliefs as well as individual rights. A chairman of the "constitutional convention" was elected, as were a "scribe" and a "sergeant-at-arms." This work received further impetus when the children read in *Life* magazine that a group of people in Michigan were meet-

ing in a basement room to establish rules for living together both as they proceeded in a caravan to Alaska and after they arrived.

Several factors served to keep individual student participation at a high level at the "convention." Participation charts were kept, sometimes by the teacher and sometimes by volunteers from the group. One day the class discussed what happens when one or two members dominate. In addition to stimulating participation, the chairman was adept at keeping the focus. He used phrases such as "I believe we were discussing . . ."; or "That's an important idea, too, Joe, but shall we answer Katherine's question first?"

The Unexpected Happens

The search for common beliefs made students examine and clarify their values. This aroused emotions and caused tension to mount as conflicting values were recognized and worked through.

As discussion began one morning under the direction of the convention chairman, one of the boys said, "I've been thinking this over and, well, first, I want to say that I believe in representative government and agree with most of the things that we have said so far, but I think it will be better if we start out with a strong leader."

"How strong is 'strong'?" one of the girls asked.

"I think he should have a lot of authority and take charge to see that everything gets organized. Then after we get our basic problems solved, well, then, we can afford to be more democratic."

The teacher was stunned. Two or three students nodded assent and mur-

mured, "That's what I think." One of the boys said, "If you do that, Stephen, then you're admitting that democracy won't work."

"No, I'm not. I think it will work, but I'm just saying that democracy is slow and inefficient! If we're going to be settling a new land, we have to get going faster, that's all."

Some students looked at the teacher. By this time there was general buzzing among the class members. Sides appeared to be forming. It began to look as if democracy might lose. One of the boys who had been on the "political beliefs" committee said, "Okay, okay. Now look. Our committee talked over all the different forms of government. We had a lot of arguments, but we think we chose the best parts from all of them. We think that the best kind of government is the one we proposed. Stephen, do you want to go against that?"

"Well, as you know, I didn't agree with some of the things the committee said. I just wanted to be able to express my opinion." Discussion ensued. Should a committee member go along with the majority vote or should he be allowed to dissent in public? The class agreed that a committee report should indicate the minority opinion also, if it were sufficiently strong.

The chairman refocused the discussion on authoritarian vs. democratic government. The role of a leader was reviewed. (The group had described the leadership role earlier in the year.) The teacher came into the discussion to ask the group to consider the relationship of practices to the achievement of objectives. The situation was finally resolved. The class agreed that the strong leader meant an extremely capable person who did have a very important duty, but

whose powers would always be determined by the other colonists. Furthermore, the responsibility for efficient organization belonged to everyone.

Work Is Evaluated

As each problem area during the year was brought to a solution, students evaluated the group's efforts as well as their own. Discussion to see whether group goals had been achieved focused on these questions which were developed by the group:

What were our objectives?

Did we accomplish them?

What objective was of particular interest to you?

Were you interested in your share of the activities?

Were you interested in others' share of the activities?

In what skills do you feel you have improved?

What new skills have you gained?

Did the group improve in its skill in working together?

What subject matter fields did we draw upon?

What would you change if you were to plan this unit again?

In December the group discussed the characteristics of a well-rounded eighth grader. Letters of self-evaluation were written by students to their parents covering the topics of personality, friendships, physical well-being, participation in school activities, self-direction, study skills, leading-out and general knowledge.

A report to parents consisting of a checklist of behavioral goals of the school plus written statements was sent home by the teacher three times during the year. Examples from the checklist are: demonstrates a growing ability and

insight in analyzing situations and problems which he faces and in reacting appropriately to them; shows growth in ability to phrase a request, to organize ideas, to present a point of view, to relate an experience.

Learning More about Students

The teacher attempted to provide opportunity for students to "feed-back" their feelings about what was going on in the classroom. Such questions as "How did you feel about our progress today?" or "When Hugh said, . . . , what meaning did you give to it?" Part of the time students handed in written reactions. More often the group members discussed their feelings.

By means of a checklist the teacher asked for students' perceptions of her as a helper. Some students wanted to know how they were perceived by their classmates. Those who wrote their names on the blackboard at a given time received brief, written reactions from all other members in the class. These reactions were compiled by the teacher and a private conference was held with each student. Generally, three points were discussed (a) summary of the reactions, (b) feelings about the per-

ceptions, and (c) steps necessary for maintaining the relationship or changing the relationship.

Pupils also wrote on "What Kind of a Boy (Girl) I Think I Am." They wrote on "What I Think the Teacher Thinks of Me." In addition, personal problems checklists and writing that the group did during their work on understanding adolescence provided further data.

In summary, we have said that:

1. One can have confidence in the quality of the decisions if students know that with the teacher they are responsible for making choices in the planning, the follow-through and the evaluating of their school experiences.

2. Goals tend to become internalized and lead to self-commitment and self-direction if students share in goal-setting.

3. Students are eager to study subject matter and improve their study skills if the need for this study and these skills grows out of purposeful experiences.

4. The real concerns and values of each individual must be understood by himself and by the teacher if they are to work toward common goals.

5. Self-evaluation is necessary if objectives are to be achieved.

6. Democratic values can be strengthened if the classroom is operated democratically.

The Cricket

IF the sparrows would stop
their wrangling,
and the cardinal neglect
his morning news,
the garden muffle
tips of roots
and flowers diminish
their colors,

IF the air bent down
to silence
worm twist, ant scurry, bee whisk,
grass sigh, leaves' excitement,
IF the whole world held its breath
for just one second . . .
you could hear
the cheerful cricket in my heart.

—JAMES HEARST, *Cedar Falls, Iowa*

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