

Goals can best be reached through skillful planning of opportunities.

Mildred Ellisor



PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Ways of Working with Learners

A MAJOR concern of public education in the United States is the maximum development of every child's potentialities. Schools, as social institutions, are given the responsibility of providing opportunities for young people to acquire the understandings, skills, attitudes and appreciations which will insure intelligent and satisfying participation in school, home and community life. In a democratic society, it is important that every citizen realize his capacities, learn to live harmoniously with others, and accept his civic responsibilities.

A highly technical, specialized, and rapidly changing world has caused life in the United States to become increasingly complex. The school program designed to meet the needs of today's youth will of necessity be different from that provided a few decades ago. New understandings, skills and attitudes are required for effective living in today's

world and in the world of tomorrow. Our country needs citizens who can read but who think as they read, who speak correctly and take part in group discussions intelligently, and who make decisions based on careful weighing of evidence.

Each school system has its objectives and instructional program which serve to direct pupil growth and therefore determine what kinds of learning opportunities will be provided. The curriculum organization and the ways of working depend upon what the school expects to do for the pupils who attend.

There is no one ideal way of working with learners. The best way probably includes a combination of many ways, each used when it seems to be most effective for a particular individual or group of children to achieve a given purpose. The increasing knowledge of child growth and development, conditions and trends in contemporary life, and accepted purposes provides guides in determining the learning opportunities made available. Learning is im-

Mildred Ellisor is assistant professor of education, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama.

proved when teachers identify major purposes in their work and seek to determine the extent to which these purposes are being achieved. These purposes, as identified by a well-known educator,¹ may include helping the student to: (a) acquire an understanding of himself, (b) acquire an understanding of the world in which he lives, (c) develop adequate patterns of behavior, (d) develop a set of defensible goals, (e) develop adequate techniques and competencies needed to achieve these goals, (f) develop proficiency in critical thinking, and (g) gain competency in evaluating self-identified goals.

A significant factor in determining the kind and quality of learning that takes place in the classroom is the teacher. New buildings, more and better instructional materials, and more special services will not necessarily result in better learning experiences for young people. An effective teacher believes that all students have worth and dignity. He has a genuine respect for them as individuals, and they know it. Patience with and sympathetic understanding of boys and girls, a sincere interest in their welfare, a mature and well-adjusted personality, a cheerful outlook, and professional competence are essential qualities for the teacher. He must also have some understanding of what is important to be learned. He must also know much about the background and readiness for learning of each pupil and how he feels about himself and others.

The classroom environment, including the physical, intellectual, emotional,

¹ This statement of purposes is adapted from an article, "The Role of College Teaching," by Truman M. Pierce, dean of the School of Education, Auburn University, Auburn, Alabama, in a bulletin *Preparing College Teachers*. This bulletin was published by The University of Kentucky and The Southern Regional Board.

and social aspects, plays an important role in determining the quality of learning opportunities provided for young people. It is important that pupils live and work in a classroom that is attractive, functional, stimulating, and has a friendly work atmosphere that makes possible the achievement of accepted purposes. The learner must feel accepted and free to examine new ideas and assume responsibility in making decisions and to do his part in carrying forward the program of work.

If the school is to offer each student the opportunity for maximum development of his abilities, the program of work and the practices and procedures used must be those most effective for each individual. The best kind of learning goes on when rich and varied experiences are provided, when there is opportunity to engage in reflective thought and problem-solving, when emphasis is placed on pupil participation in planning, executing and evaluating the work, and experiences are provided for creativeness, self-direction, and critical thinking.

Varied Approaches Useful

Studies have shown that older and more modern ways of working are about equally effective in teaching subject matter. However, an approach that includes pupil-participation activities will provide opportunity for the development of many kinds of desirable behavior in addition to subject matter learnings. The pattern of organizing a class for learning selected by a teacher is directly related to the goals desired. If the teacher interprets the needs of the pupils as concerned mainly with academic achievement he will have a more rigidly organized class. If the goals in-



PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Various approaches can be used in sharing information and ideas.

clude also social and emotional growth of young people, a more flexible classroom organization will be provided. The class may be organized around three kinds of activities: total group activities, small group activities, and individual work.

There are many types of activities which may be more effective and economical of time for both students and teacher with the class working together as a whole. Some of these are the following:

Exploration of possible areas for study
Introduction of new topics or problems for study where purposes and ways of working are determined

Planning regarding learning activities and methods of study

Explanations needed for understanding of concepts or a new process

Class discussions of issues where pertinent ideas may be examined and different positions presented or defended and where generalizations, understandings and appreciations may be developed

Summarizing what has been learned and helping students in evaluating what is important, which summaries may be made by the teacher to help clarify the discussion or by individual pupils or small groups and presented to the class

Activities for enrichment purposes

Evaluation of knowledge learned, skills mastered, and appreciations and attitudes developed

Sharing small group study with the class, using various ways of sharing the information and ideas of the subgroups with the

total group such as through panels, debates, symposiums, forums, exhibits, dramatic presentations, and creative writing.

The teacher's problem is to plan for the wide range of differences among pupils in the particular class with which he is working. Experimentation and research have emphasized grouping within the class as a way of improving the learning and meeting the individual needs of its members. There is little evidence that indicates the best approach to this class grouping. Different purposes and different situations will require different procedures. There is nothing magical about groups; they do not necessarily provide better learning and should be used as a means to an end and not an end in itself. Small groups may be formed to achieve such purposes as these:

Handling classroom routines and house-keeping duties

Grouping should provide for individual needs.

PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR



Group research and more detailed study of concepts, ideas and problems

Improving human relations and helping pupils in their social education, giving opportunity to work on a common task and develop skills of cooperative planning, and respect for each other's ideas and feelings

Providing more and varied opportunity for each person to participate

Giving students an opportunity to pursue special interests

Providing for additional practice in developing skills

Gathering and organizing data pertinent to the solution of a problem

Permitting the teacher to work with a small group of a narrower range of ability or achievement to give more specialized instruction.

Some general principles that may serve as a guide in grouping children for instruction may include:

Grouping should be flexible and specifically suited to established purposes.

Groups should provide for meeting individual needs and interests of boys and girls.

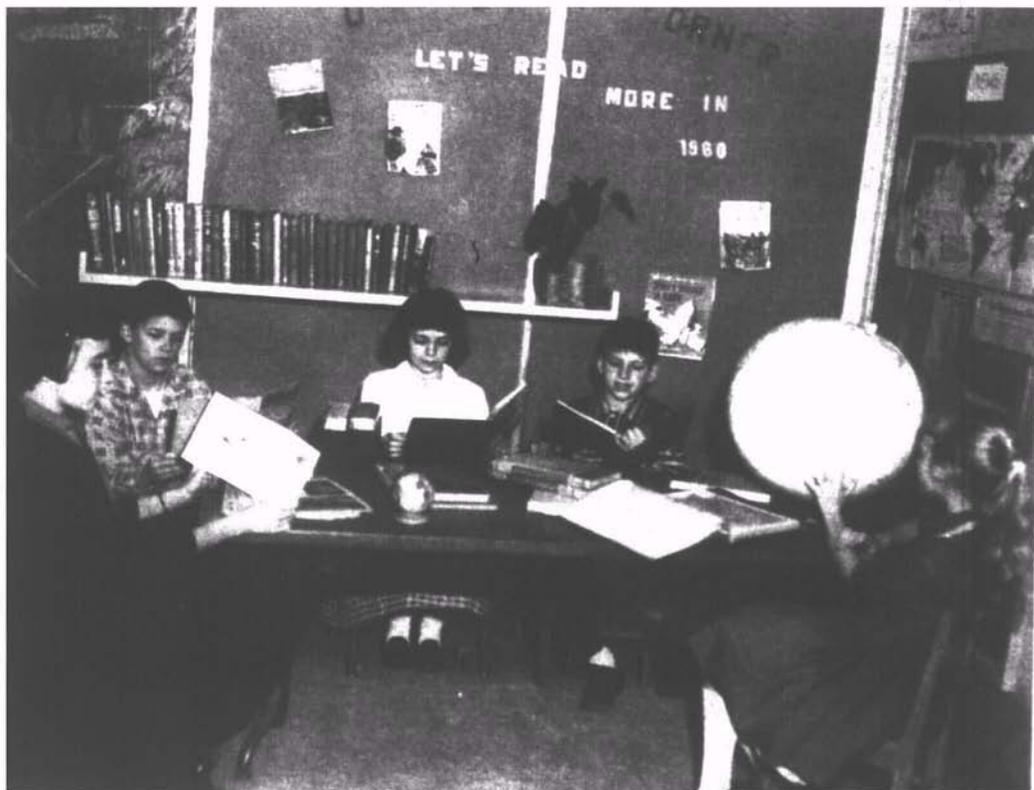
Grouping may be of two general types—interest or self-choice group, and grouping in terms of level of achievement or particular need in a subject.

Grouping should provide opportunity for the child to gain a satisfactory balance between his personal growth needs and his needs for systematic sequential instructional skills.

The size of groups should be determined by the purpose and nature of the activity, by the number of children who have a need for the particular skill or who have a real interest in the activity, by the number the teacher can satisfactorily guide, and by the age and maturity of the pupils.

Grouping in skills should be made on the basis of continuous study and evaluation of children's needs and progress.

A child should be in a group where he will have a possibility of some success and at the same time there must be a challenge.



Organizing for learning is directly related to goals.

PHOTO COURTESY THE AUTHOR

Grouping can be more effective when adequate records are kept and used.

Opportunities for Learning

Good planning will also make provision for students to do some individual work. This may be pursuing individual interests through research, investigation and experimentation; some creative activity in writing, music or art; or it may be a time for practice and drill appropriate to individual needs and of a type that will provide depth and variety. There should be some time which the teacher devotes to helping individuals with their problems and concerns.

A good school day should provide op-

portunity for a pupil to have a variety of carefully chosen experiences and over a period of time a chance to participate in total class activities, small group work, and also pursue his individual concerns.

Examples of the way four teachers have worked with groups of children to achieve purposes are given in the descriptions which follow.

Poetry

John Masefield's "Sea Fever" captured the interest and imagination of a sixth grade group of children and led to a study of poetry.² The children brought

² Reported by Mrs. Ludie Williams, Livingston, Alabama.

their favorite poems to share with the class and the teacher also shared some of hers.

Many children enjoyed participation in creative dramatic activities based upon their poems. Some made shadow boxes and pictures suggested by the poetry.

One day the pupils decided to try writing their own poems. The teacher read some poetry to the class and then talked about "picture" words. They spoke about colors and what these colors meant to them. The children grouped themselves by choice. There was an all-girl group, an all-boy group, and two mixed groups. Three of the groups chose a color as inspiration for their poem, while the fourth group chose sounds. With some assistance from the teacher each group took the individual expressions of the members and combined these into poems which were later published in the school paper.

Study of Seeds

A real and enriching learning experience began when a second grader brought a coconut to school.³ As the children examined and talked about the coconut, differences in opinion were expressed about seeds. The teacher, recognizing an opportunity for the children to discover and find out, thoughtfully guided them toward revealing what they already had observed, and toward expressing what they would like to know about seeds.

They wrote simple verses about seeds and with the help of the music teacher adapted these words to music. They also developed interpretative dances for mood music to portray rain, sunshine

³ Reported by Mrs. Jerry Franklin, Key West, Florida.

and wind. Through the use of many art media, and with the guidance of the art supervisor, they experienced many creative activities in both two and three dimensional work. They showed through their pictures and three dimensional objects the many things they had learned about seeds such as variety of size, color, texture, fruits, flowers, plants, and products.

As they continued to enjoy exploring the wonderful world of seeds they began to talk about ways they could share their experiences with other children. They decided they could present a story about seeds through dialogue, song and dance using the things they had written and created. This stimulating and enriching experience offered many opportunities for fundamental learning of basic skills and concepts through thinking, observing, reading, writing, feeling, doing, and sharing.

Use of Clay

An elementary school purchased a ceramic kiln and provided clay.⁴ Soon it became evident that almost every child handled this material freely and with few inhibitions. As each class worked with the clay, teachers noted that all children became very involved in the process—even those children who often interfered with the work of other children or those who were usually not willing to work and share as a member of the group. It seemed that every child had found a medium through which he could express himself.

Good things seemed to happen to all the children as a result of their experience with clay and especially good effects were noted with some of the chil-

⁴ Reported by Miss Jeanette Howard, Key West, Florida.

dren who had real adjustment problems. Several of the classroom teachers, with the assistance of the art supervisor, decided to find a way to give these children with adjustment problems further opportunity to explore the possibilities of clay.

Extending the school day for two afternoons each week seemed feasible. This allowed an afternoon for the children in the primary grades and one for the children in the intermediate grades. Teachers volunteered to come with the children from their room to provide the individual help each child needed. The groups consisted of 10 to 15 children. One child replaced another as the teacher felt a child was ready to leave the group. The services of the art supervisor were available for these afternoons and the children were given every opportunity to explore the possibilities of the material with which they were working.

In evaluating this extended experience in creativity the teachers and art supervisor believe the children grew in many ways—socially, mentally, physically and creatively through: (a) accepting responsibility and working independently; (b) experiencing creative thinking and problem solving; (c) developing coordination of muscle and mind; (d) learning to share—ideas, tools, material and space; (e) learning to care for and respect projects and material; and (f) learning the basic skills for working with the material.

Algebra

The teacher and students worked together in a first-year Algebra class⁵ to provide a situation where each student

⁵ Reported by Miss Laura Newell, Auburn, Alabama.

had an opportunity to work according to his level of ability and achievement.

In beginning algebra, many topics were studied, each related to the other. As a different topic was introduced, for example, the solution of linear equations and their applications for use, the class worked together as one group. During this period the basic understandings and procedures were introduced. After several days many of the students were ready to proceed with more advanced work, while others needed more instruction in the basic understandings. At this point the class usually separated into two groups. Assignments were planned to take care of the needs of the groups. The work was planned so that one group could work independently as the teacher worked with the other group. The procedure of conducting the class varied. The groups were flexible and changed as different topics were studied. At the end of a period of time the class came together as a total group for evaluation.

The students welcomed this opportunity to work in these flexible groups. The more advanced students had an opportunity to engage in many enrichment activities, while the others could improve their understanding of the topic studied.

Each of these descriptions shows how a teacher has facilitated learning by planning and guiding activities related to acceptable educational goals.

At the present time good teachers are using time, space, materials and people in many different ways as they provide learning opportunities for young people. However, there may be still better ways than are now being used. We need continuing experimentation and projects designed to try new ideas in ways of providing learning situations of richness, balance, variety and continuity.

Copyright © 1960 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.