

## Self-Contained Classroom: Where Do We Stand?

*Children profit  
when teachers know them well.*

ONE-teacher-to-a-classroom is the predominant pattern of organization in elementary schools throughout the United States. "Self-contained classroom" is the term usually applied to this arrangement. In many school systems this organizational pattern was a direct outcome of study and research in the area of human growth and development. During the 1940's, several studies of elementary school organization were made. Each study reported an increase in the number of school systems having the self-contained classroom as its basic organizational pattern.

Most educators who work in elementary schools define the self-contained classroom as one in which a pupil is under the guidance of one teacher for most of his school-sponsored activities. The teacher is expected to have much knowledge about each child in the class and to use this knowledge in providing guidance and assistance to the pupil and to his class. The self-contained classroom does not exclude the pupil from having

contact with other teachers, other pupils, various specialists and school and community resources.

Within a school system, assignments of elementary school classroom teachers are generally made in one of two ways. Either a teacher works with one class and has responsibility in all subject matter areas or a teacher works with several classes and has responsibility in a limited number of subject matter areas. At the present time, various proposals and demonstrations which require a teacher to work with several classes during the school day are receiving nationwide publicity.

There is at present a lack of carefully documented research evidence to show comparisons between patterns of organization and achievement in subject matter and growth in other areas of learning which are generally accepted as goals of the elementary school. It is important, therefore, to re-emphasize those values which come to children whose teachers know them well. Clara R. Chiara has written: "The teacher who knows the learner as an individual does not fragment the child, neither does he assess

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him solely on his ability or talent in one narrow field. Rather he views each student in his totality as a person of innate worth who has strengths and weaknesses in varying degrees in the many different life activities in which he engages. This climate of acceptance and respect encourages each student to move toward optimum realization of self."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the safest prediction one can make regarding today's elementary pupils and the years ahead is that the pupils will experience a continually accelerating rate of change in all areas of life. Basic to comprehending these changes will be an ability to understand the many interrelationships which exist in our society. This ability is best developed in the elementary school when pupils are given opportunities to work on problem areas which cut across subject matter lines. Emphasis given to these lines by teachers and parents is primarily responsible for their being recognized at all by pupils.

Separating the elementary school curriculum into specific areas and assigning a portion of the program to a certain teacher is an extremely complex matter. This becomes apparent as one studies the time allotments and the fusions of subject matter areas being made in some school systems where classroom teachers are assigned to teach specific subjects. Almost any subject can be found fused with practically every other subject taught in the elementary school. In studying time allotments for a specific subject one also finds great variation.

Alice Miel has discussed the possible contributions of the self-contained classroom to efficiency in learning with re-

<sup>1</sup> Clara R. Chiara. "Effective Education in the Self-Contained Classroom." *The Self-Contained Classroom*. Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, 1960, p. 2.

spect to mental health factors, use of time, and availability of resources and facilities. She states, "If a type of organization has more promise for accomplishing certain goals (better mental health, more integrated, more complete learning), then our best course is to work toward the realization of the potential that is there."<sup>2</sup>

### Promising Practices

It is also important to identify practices that are considered most promising in today's elementary schools. We can then determine how each practice will be promoted or hindered by a specific organizational pattern. Some promising practices promoted by the self-contained classroom include the following:

1. Parent-teacher conferences can be held. In these it is possible to discuss a pupil's intellectual, physical and social achievements and cooperatively plan next steps for working with the pupil.
2. Special resource teachers and classroom teachers can work as teams in teaching groups of pupils. A team approach enables the teacher specialists to be of maximum assistance to the group. Significant all-school activities such as sings, exhibits and special programs are possible when the resource teachers and classroom teachers work cooperatively on such undertakings.
3. Field trips can be conducted that extend over a longer period of time than normally allotted for one class.
4. Upper-elementary school pupils can work in many ways with younger elementary school pupils. This practice should enrich the school program for both the older and younger pupils. Plan-

<sup>2</sup> Alice Miel. "The Self-Contained Classroom: An Assessment." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. LIX, No. 5, February 1958, p. 286-87.

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ning for such activities should involve all teachers and pupils who participate or who are affected by the program.

5. Activities that are under way simultaneously can be aimed at taking care of individual needs and interests. In each classroom, frequent periods of time should be provided for each pupil to work in those areas in which he is weak, or those in which he is strong or has special interest. The teacher who knows the pupils well will be able to guide each pupil into activities that will provide a balanced program for him.

6. Materials can be used in various ways that seem appropriate to the learning activity in progress. For example, the arithmetic book is very helpful, not only for mathematics but for the development of specific reading skills; and a map is often used in the teaching, not only of geography, but of arithmetic.

7. Problems can be studied that do not lend themselves to any one subject mat-

ter area. For example, a study of conservation or weather would draw upon areas such as reading, science and social studies.

It is true, of course, that one can identify situations in which the human relations and the promising practices possible in a self-contained classroom do not actually exist. One must realize, however, that no single pattern of organization can always assure a good school program. There is at present considerable public pressure for improving our schools. Many persons apparently believe that almost any change in organization will bring about the desired improvement. Educators, therefore, need to channel the public interest into constructive improvements, such as expanded in-service programs and longer periods of employment for professional personnel. Taking the easy, and often regressive, way of dealing with such pressures by drastically changing the existing pattern of organization may prove to be too costly to the pupils as well as—eventually—to the society.

A self-contained classroom offers the pupil opportunities for: (a) the development of strong human relationships, (b) a teacher who knows him well, (c) integration of subject matter areas, (d) individualized instruction, (e) growth in self-understanding and self-respect, and (f) choices in the use of his time. Since these opportunities are easier to provide in the self-contained classroom organization, this pattern should continue to be the predominant one in the schools of the United States.

Reaching the full potential of the self-contained classroom is an ever continuing process. It is hoped that each reader will view his own situation not only in terms of "what it is" but also in terms of "what it might be."

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