

Pupils Who Do Not Respond

DETROIT is probably more typical than it is unique among large cities in its concern about pupils who do not respond to traditional school offerings. Along with 13 other major cities, Detroit is engaged in a cooperative venture in the use of exploratory programs and sharing experiences. In this program the Detroit Board of Education is supporting various kinds of experimentation to find how best to hold pupils in school by making their school program more rewarding and satisfying.

Such a complex problem seldom has a simple answer. Certainly the problem of the reluctant learner, or the disaffected pupil, has so many roots and branches that a specific remedy is out of the question. This point of view is best illustrated by the largest and most promising of the Detroit experimental programs.

Great Cities Project

Now in its fourth year of operation, the past three with Ford Foundation support, the Great Cities School Improvement Project involves four elementary schools, two junior high schools and one large high school in the central core of the problem-ridden area of the city. Ten

thousand pupils and approximately five hundred adult school personnel are involved.

Without going into the sociological ramifications of the problem, which is a fascinating and educational experience in itself, several points should be noted. It should be pointed out that from the beginning the thesis was held that only those things should be tried which would be feasible for expansion on a much wider scale in the system if they proved successful. Thus, a financial ceiling was established—ten percent above normal per capita costs in the schools involved. This means that approximately forty dollars per pupil in these seven schools has been budgeted each year to support the project.

An intensive analysis was made of the factors which partially describe the pupils concerned. These factors were: low achievement levels, overagedness in grade, high rate of failure, and inadequacies of home and community environment. The Detroit staff then developed an hypothesis that the problems of pupils with limited background for

Carl L. Byerly is Assistant Superintendent, Division for Improvement of Instruction, Detroit Public Schools, Michigan.

learning could be effectively solved by a multi-pronged approach or attack, through:

1. Adapting the instructional program to the needs of these children
2. Modifying the organizational patterns within the school
3. Orienting the staff to the needs of these children
4. Improving and adapting instructional equipment and materials to be used in the classroom
5. Involving of parents and the community and enlisting their aid in supporting the work of the school.

From the beginning a project director and secretarial service were provided for the program. A full-time evaluator was also assigned to the project to establish base data and control situations, criteria for evaluating changes noted, and instruments to be used in measuring results. In July 1962 a full-time research assistant was added.

A full-time school-community agent was assigned to each school. This person, a trained social worker, could make the necessary liaison between school, home and community, including the various social agencies and municipal departments whose services were to be mobilized. A full-time "coaching teacher," or remedial expert, was selected and assigned to each school as well as a full-time "visiting teacher" to give special attention to pupils whose learning problems stem from emotional or psychological difficulties.

A major concern has been the improvement of the perceptions of teachers as these apply to the children, to their community, and to the curriculum. Most teachers have been reared in a different socioeconomic situation and have difficulty in assessing objectively the chil-

dren from culturally different homes. They frequently bring to their classrooms a rigid value system quite different from that represented by the school clientele. In this situation it is practically impossible for the teacher to understand or to relate to his pupils—a condition necessary for effective teaching.

The standard procedure—workshops for teachers, with expert consultants from the disciplines of education, sociology, psychology and social work—was tried and found of limited value. Very few significant changes in the behavior of teachers took place as a result of listening to experts. The main key to modification of behavior seems to be involvement.

We have found that staff and curricular needs vary from school to school. To achieve the kind of involvement that brings positive change requires each school staff to look seriously at its unique community, the unique problems of its children and youth and its own unique strengths and weaknesses as a staff. Then comes a natural cooperative search for appropriate curricular and organizational modifications to strengthen its own school program, geared to the needs of the pupils concerned. Thus our experience has taught us that our in-service programs for teachers, whether held on released time, on Saturdays (with pay) or during vacation periods (also with pay), should be structured around local school curricular problems. Such programs usually involve only a single school staff.

Such soul-searching sessions have resulted in the introduction of a preschool program in one school, nongraded primary units, modified departmental or platoon organization in the intermediate grades, and block-time or core classes in the junior high schools. Team teaching, involving cooperative planning, and in-

novations in grouping and evaluation, are under trial in many schools. A new work-study program has been introduced in the participating high school.

A new and different type of reader series is under development. The first four preprimers are published and in use experimentally this year.

The school libraries, in all seven schools, remain open after school and have been made circulating libraries to augment public library service which is inadequate in these school communities.

An effort is made to compensate for the dearth of constructive experiences in the lives of these pupils. Thus the school-community agent has organized in each school a whole galaxy of after-school clubs and activities as well as remedial and enrichment classes, using teachers, lay persons, and college students as leaders. Equally important, during school hours, pupils are taken by bus on various trips to acquaint them with the cultural, civic, industrial and commercial life of the city. Such trips are always related to the classroom work and to the future aspirations of these pupils. A full summer school program provides not only interesting and recreational experiences for the children but helps them carry over what they have learned, in behavior as well as actual knowledge, from one school year to the next.

The school-community agent is also responsible for involving parents. Such involvement is necessary to raise the aspirations of parents and their children with regard to academic and social achievement. Thus, these seven schools are truly community schools. They are virtually beehives of activity during after-school and evening hours. Group activities may be skill classes requested by adults or recreational and social activities which are geared to developing leader-

ship potential and the social competency of adults whose circumstances have denied them this opportunity in the past. Simply to meet together, to plan for their children, to take short-term enrichment classes, to learn how to budget, how to prepare food, how to repair furniture, and how to be more efficient and effective in household tasks and family relations, has provided adults with opportunities to bolster self-esteem and to raise aspirations for themselves and their children.

The reporting of results at this time is largely subjective and based mostly on observation, but there is considerable evidence of improvement in these vital areas:

1. Pupil achievement, as measured by standard tests, has shown remarkable improvement.

2. The failure, or non-promotion, rate is dramatically reduced.

3. The atmosphere or learning climate of these schools has been transformed.

4. Parents and patrons of the school have taken a new lease on life and with it a much more supportive attitude toward schools, teaching, and learning.

School-Community Behavior Project

This project was started in two schools in 1953 and in its early stages was called a "Project for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency." It is now operative in 21 elementary schools which are scattered throughout the city and represent a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic communities.

The School-Community Behavior Project has been a cooperative venture involving a team approach to the problems presented by an individual child, the case having been identified as a potentially serious deviate or behavior prob-

lem which may be either withdrawn or overt and aggressive in his behavior pattern. (Boys outnumber girls almost ten to one in the case load of the project.)

The Action Team is composed of school personnel (the principal or assistant, the teacher[s], the attendance officer, the visiting teacher), agency personnel (case workers, group therapists), volunteer specialists (pediatrician, psychiatrist, psychologist), representatives from the Mayor's Commission on Children and Youth and from the Wayne State University School of Social Work.

An Action Team in a given school will identify, study and work with 12 to 15 pupils during a school year. The average child in these cases is approximately nine years old. During the school year 1961-62 a total of 191 children were subject to the Action Team approach and in most cases there was a dramatic change in the pupil's attitude and behavior and he has returned to normal relations with peers and teachers. As an arrested or redeemed case he will be subject to continuous surveillance and will be given help in maintaining his new status. Some cases are carried through two or three years as a concern of the Action Team. In every case the home and parents are involved and identified with the therapy.

The English "S" Program

The tenth grade is a crucial period because it is the time a disaffected pupil typically reaches the "drop-out" age—when he passes the age of compulsory attendance. In most cases the English class is the one which, for a number of reasons, triggers the dropout. Most of these reasons seem to relate to low-reading skills and the standard emphasis on subject matter which is unpalatable to nonacademic pupils.

Two years ago a program was developed which was geared specifically to the needs of potential dropouts. This program was tried out in one high school and has proved so successful that at present it is used in 11 high schools, in 41 classes involving 36 teachers and approximately 1,000 students.

The course is called English "S"—and the "S" stands for Communication Skills. This course was developed by a summer workshop of knowledgeable and perceptive English teachers representing five high schools. The course begins with the current interests of the low-ability, or low-achieving, or unmotivated pupils and includes sequentially developed units, many of which provide built-in success experiences. The course itself is planned in such ways that basic communication skills can be practiced during each class period. Materials of instruction in reading, writing, listening and speaking are based on the interests and psychological needs of the low achiever.

The classroom situation is made as informal as possible and pupil participation is encouraged. Paperback books are standard fare. Pupil morale in these classes is at an all-time high. Failure, instead of a commonplace occurrence, has become a rarity. This does not mean that these students are suddenly performing at normal or above grade level; rather they are performing enthusiastically and intelligently at their ability level and they are getting satisfaction from school.

A few dramatic changes have been observed when pupils have really found themselves and have asked for transfer to regular classes, in which they are now holding their own. Teachers are rewarded when they find that pupils are reading voluntarily many times more books than their previous history showed. This is not at all unusual. The difference

is in their motivation and their feeling of success. Of course the selections are screened and many classics are included. Also, teachers are carefully selected for these classes on the basis of their ability to understand and relate to disaffected youth.

Other Projects

In addition to the experimental programs previously described, four other major projects deserve mention.

1. A research study is in its final phases on "high potential but low achieving" students in the third year of high school to determine guidelines for counseling or working with such students. This is a two year study involving four high schools, more than two hundred teachers and approximately 2000 students.

2. The Detroit Experimental English Program involves unorthodox scheduling, use of lay persons as theme readers, greatly increased reading and writing assignments and more individualized instruction. It is a part of the regular program in nine senior high schools and serving some 3000 students. For reluctant learners of average ability in this program, the record shows their reading has been more than doubled and the failure rate has been cut in half. What is more, the pupils like this new and different approach.

3. After two years of study on what the schools should do to prepare pupils for the changing world of work, a report, with recommendations, was adopted by the Board of Education in the spring of 1962. The responsibility for developing a more adequate program (and philosophy) for meeting the needs of the nonacademic pupil was stressed

and a general evaluation of the whole school program is under way.

4. A new major project was instituted this fall to gain insight and practical knowledge concerning vocational training for the mentally retarded. This is for youth from 15 to 21 who have come up through Special Education classes and are now at an age when they are about to take a place in adult society. This project, with a special U.S. Office of Education grant, is so new that no report, other than an announcement, can be made at this time. Ten staff members work with fifty pupils and they have a small building all to themselves. Cooperative work-study arrangements call for an unusually skilled coordination with business and industry to service this kind of pupil.

In conclusion, in Detroit we have accepted the philosophy that if the schools are expected to educate *all* the youth of our city, it is necessary to provide programs to fit the needs of all youth. If we really believe in the importance of individual differences, then our programs and practices in the public schools should reflect this belief. We have a long way to go to achieve this objective but we think we are making giant strides in that direction.

Changing your address?

Don't Forget Educational Leadership!

The Post Office will not forward copies and we cannot always send duplicates of copies that go astray. SO PLEASE . . . at least one month before the first issue to go to the new address, send us your new address and, if possible, an address label from a back copy. If label isn't available send new and old address to:

Educational Leadership

1201 16th St., N.W., Washington 6, D.C.

Copyright © 1963 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.