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When school and home

Focus on Achievement

THE idea that parents can be enthusiastic about elementary curriculum to the extent of improving academic achievement may seem to be a misty dream. Yet, unlike the illusory apparition that plagued Hamlet, such a vision appears to have practical benefits for elementary educators.

An experimental program designed to raise the achievement level of culturally deprived elementary children has brought illuminating evidence. This program has proved that parents and teachers, with cooperative support of administrators, can kindle in children a fresh interest in learning. Statistical evaluation subsequently showed marked gains in academic achievement.

This experimental program was designated, "School and Home: Focus on Achievement." It was started following a decision by the teachers in an elementary school and a curriculum consultant to "quit talking and do something" about raising the students' levels of achievement and of interest in the classrooms.

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The hypothesis of the program, though not academically new by any means, centered around an idea that many teachers long have held—that children will achieve more if they learn early to develop sound work habits and attitudes. Underlying this thought is a corollary, that to perform such an educational awakening, the cooperative support of parents is important.

The school principal, teachers and administrative staff offered their services. This resulted in a meeting with students' parents at the school. At this discussion meeting, pertinent facts were presented. If the parents wanted their children to finish school, they had an obligation to begin now to help prepare their youngsters. The current industrial picture was studied. The fact that automation is cutting off many young, unskilled workers from many jobs was explained. Parents learned of the teachers' and administrators' concern and interest in giving their children an education that would prepare them to be useful, responsible citizens.

The cooperative program that grew out of this session stimulated much enthusiasm among parents. The program also created interest on the part of stu-

dents, and a concerted effort by teachers, principals and administrators to work together on this team objective.

Setting of the Program

The experiment was undertaken in one elementary school, and later was started in a second school during the 1961-62 school year. The program involved children enrolled in kindergarten through the sixth grade. These youngsters were primarily from the low-income families living in the industrial hub of Flint, Michigan. With few exceptions, the parents had moved to the city from the rural South to seek employment in local industrial plants. A majority represented limited educational backgrounds. Approximately 1100 children were included in the program.

A control group was established in another Flint public elementary school. These children represented similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

It should be noted that the Flint Public Schools are community centers, having gained national recognition as working-action examples of the community education concept. These schools, open after regular hours for all neighborhood persons, are regularly used by thousands of youngsters and adults in a variety of educational, recreational and cultural programs. Such a program gives the teachers and staffs a ready acceptance for new ideas from the standpoint of parental interest, since many of the parents previously had been involved in some school functions. The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, operating in partnership with the Flint Board of Education as the Mott Program, had provided opportunities for educational advancement and achievement for students in the study and for other students also.

This favorable "climate" doubtless provided a shortcut for gaining public and parental acceptance of an experimental program that would require more planning and graduated involvement in other schools where such programs are not in operation.

Frame of Reference

The theoretical frame of reference for the study is based on the action theorists' postulations¹ that the group in which the individual is socialized influences his motivation to achieve in school.

It seemed that a program designed to raise the achievement of children who lacked the necessary motivation to achieve adequately must involve working with these children's "significant others"² for the purpose of getting them to expect more of these children. The students were expected to "internalize" the expectations of these "significant others" and, therefore, to expect more of themselves. It was predicted that this change in their attitudes and values would take place as they learned their values from "significant others."

Role of Parents

The "significant others" for elementary school children were assumed to be parents and teachers. In the parent-teacher meetings, mothers and fathers learned that their attitudes and values greatly influenced those of their children. The parents were made to understand that without awareness and intent, they were

¹ See: George H. Mead. *Mind, Self and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934; and W. B. Brookover. "Some Social Psychological Conceptions of Classroom Learning." *School and Society* 87: 84-87; 1959.

² "Significant others" is defined as those people who are important to an individual.

not setting the kind of example that brings about desirable attitudes and habits toward schoolwork.

Parents were: (a) impressed that they must do more than *tell* their children that they need to achieve in school. They were frequently reminded that they must *show* the children that their schoolwork is important; (b) given suggestions of activities and behavior which would provide at home a climate conducive to academic achievement.

The interest evidenced by parents was heartwarming to the teachers and administrators. The parents not only agreed to carry out the suggestions, but for the most part were highly supportive. The reason, so the program planners believe, was that the parents realized that school officials cared enough about their children to seek help from them.

Another facet of parental involvement was that of getting parents themselves to call on other parents. Some of the mothers, anxious to do a little extra, took the initiative in getting all parents involved. These community leaders made numerous home calls, followed up with telephone reminders. The school communities were divided into blocks, so that every section was contacted. The stimulating result was that parents heeded the message and supported the experimental program in greater participation than imagined by the program's initiators.

Role of Teachers

It has already been shown that the teachers had a real interest and concern in the achievement of their students. This interest stimulated their own group meetings, discussions involving principals and curriculum consultants. The interest shown by parents in the open meetings whetted the teachers' appetites for up-

grading instruction in the classrooms. Ideas were freely shared and explored, as were materials and teaching techniques.

The teachers at both schools placed primary emphasis on reading comprehension and vocabulary development. The students took books home frequently for individual as well as family reading. The teachers saw that each primary child was given an inexpensive metal file box and word cards to aid in improving sight vocabulary. These word cards frequently were sent home for study.

In all these activities, the teachers worked closely with parents. The teachers: (a) sent books home with students, (b) sent study assignments home, and (c) called parent conferences as needed. Parental contacts included home visits, inviting parents to the schools for discussion-information conferences and special problems. The staff developed a reading incentives program for students in second through sixth grades. Called The Bookworm Club, this special project appealed to young imaginative minds offering incentives to progress in reading skills. Parents assisted teachers in the preparation of small booklets designed to stimulate interest.

Teachers came up with creative hints for parents. Students arrived home wearing tags that read: "Please read to me," "May I read to you?" and "Please help me study my spelling." Students, too, took an active part in their own study assignments. Under direction of teachers, each class developed a check list for doing assigned work. The students did their own self-checking, adding to the fun atmosphere of learning at school and home.

Getting the support of the parents meant continuing their interest in the program. To help accomplish this over an extensive period of time, parents were

given these suggestions which sum up basic objectives:

1. Read daily to your children—preschoolers included. Fathers also are encouraged to take turns reading to their youngsters.

2. Listen to your children read.

3. Provide a quiet period in the home each day for reading and study. This should be at a regular time so that it becomes a part of the family's routine. (Research indicates that low-income families lack routine and regularity in the home.³)

4. See that children have pencils, paper, a notebook and a dictionary for home study. (Observation indicates that children of low income families often lack proper tools for schoolwork. These same children may have an abundance of gum, candy and gadgets, indicating the problem to be one of values rather than a problem of money.)

5. Parents were reminded that if they show that they value school achievement, their children likewise will value it.

To supplement these suggestions, teachers gave booklets to the parents, explaining techniques of reading aloud to their children; ways that parents can help their children improve their study habits; and ways to develop favorable attitudes toward school. Again, the handbooks were discussed with parents.

During the summer vacation, the program was continued through use of summer materials. Parents asked that they be provided with a list of summer activities to help them in maintaining the attitudes and habits their children had acquired during the school year. Each child also was given a summer Reading Record Booklet. The child was expected to keep a record of books read during the summer and to return this record

³ See: Martha Ericson. "Child Rearing and Social Status." *American Journal of Sociology* 52: 190-92; 1946; and Allison Davis and Robert J. Havighurst. *Father of the Man*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947.

to his teacher when fall classes resumed.

Forms 1 and 2 of the Gates Revised Reading Tests were administered in pre- and post-test situations to all children in the two experimental schools. The same test was administered simultaneously to all second and fifth grade students in the control school. Their reading gains were compared with gains made by second and fifth year children in the two experimental schools.

Evaluation of the Program

Children in the two experimental schools showed overall gains of 5.4 months in reading during the five-month period between pre- and post-tests. Children in the control school showed an overall gain of 2.7 months in reading during the same period.

The evaluation showed that gains made by Experimental School C generally were greater than those made by Experimental School B. One factor which may contribute to this finding is that Experimental School B entered the program somewhat later than did the Experimental School C, with some problems in getting total staff involvement in School B. Children in all schools showed greater gains in reading vocabulary than in reading comprehension. Since reading comprehension encompasses a broader base than vocabulary, equivalent progress in comprehension can be expected with time.

The second grade children in the two experimental schools made greater mean gains in vocabulary and comprehension than did children in the control school. The mean gain differences are highly significant⁴ for vocabulary for Experi-

⁴ A probability of .05 is interpreted as moderately significant. A probability of .01 is interpreted as highly significant.

mental Schools B and C, compared with Control School A. The mean difference for comprehension is highly significant for Experimental School C, but is not significant for Experimental School B.

Fifth grade children in the two experimental schools also made significantly greater gains in vocabulary than did children in the control school. Gains made in comprehension are moderately significantly greater for children in Experimental School C but not significantly greater in Experimental School B.

A questionnaire was sent to each family in the two experimental schools to determine what opinions parents held about the Focus on Achievement Program. Approximately two-thirds of all questionnaires were returned. Of these, 85 percent contained written-in comments and suggestions. The questionnaire contained three check-type questions and three open-ended questions. Parents indicated that they felt the program helped the children with schoolwork. They also said they would like to have the program continued. As a side benefit, the parents indicated that their involvement had helped them to improve their own academic skills.

The teachers conducted a home-study survey to see if parents had set aside the quiet time for study and reading. Parents indicated the daily study time, with not one reporting that the home study was not helpful. Results of this survey showed that 90 percent of the children in the experimental schools returned their completed questionnaires, another indication of parental interest in the program.

The experimental study has definitely resulted in improved student work habits and attitudes toward schoolwork, teachers report. The experiment is continuing at the two schools. In addition, the administrators and teachers are co-

operating in establishing the program in a third school following a request by parents.

The Flint Community School administrative staff and teachers have obtained as complete statistical evidence as possible. This corroborates findings that, as good practicing educators, they believe to be true.

In summary, they believe these findings offer sound evidence to educators in the elementary field, and perhaps higher levels as well, that education today is and must be a cooperative home-school project. Educators need not be afraid to go to parents with their educational problems. Indeed, as shown by the Flint experimentation, parents, when approached with forthright honesty, will return a thousand-fold creative efforts of their own.

The Dropout

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how." Superintendents and principals tell me they would like to have good core classes, for example, but they do not have anybody who knows how to do it.

It seems to me that if our profession requires us to do something we do not know how to do, then we must learn how. This applies to the teaching profession as a whole. We will have to be satisfied with small beginnings at first, because, not knowing how, we must learn in small ways at first. We can expand on these small beginnings until we *do* know how.

The dropouts, in school and out, are legion. In some ways, they seem faceless. Our society being what it is, they have no place in it, except in school. They are wasting their time, often deteriorating rather than improving. They constitute our greatest waste. They can give us our greatest opportunity.

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