

A report on the

Peace Corps Teachers in Malaya

WHEN the ASCD Executive Committee asked me, as the then Chairman of the Commission on International Understanding, to meet with a representative of the Peace Corps, I little realized that this encounter would lead to my traveling the length of Malaya by bus, plane, truck, and taxi, visiting Peace Corps teachers.

In our conversations with Peace Corps officials, ASCD members raised such questions as: "How well will liberal arts graduates, with no professional preparation for teaching, manage their teaching assignments?" "How will these inexperienced teachers compare with the professionally prepared volunteer teacher?" "What kinds of orientation will help novices most?" "What kinds of support will be most useful in the field?" These friendly explorations continued over a period of time and many hypotheses were developed as to the kinds of problems that would emerge and of the help that would be most useful.

Samuel Babbitt, Director of the University Division, Public Affairs, The Peace Corps, and Helen Trager, Associate Director, heard that my husband and I were leaving on a year's trip around the world. They asked me if I

would be willing to visit Peace Corps teachers in one country of South East Asia and report back my impressions of their situations. This article is a brief report to ASCD of my experiences and impressions.

Most of the Peace Corps teachers I visited in Malaya were teaching mathematics, science and English in a British colonial education system in schools that would parallel in level an American junior-senior high school. Others were situated in teachers colleges in Kuala Lumpur and Penang, where they also taught mathematics, science and English as well as library sciences and art. One group of four teachers were teaching the specialized subjects in a School of Business in Kuala Lumpur under the direction of an American business educator.

In all these schools and colleges, English was the teaching language. The students, who typically live and think in another language, have to learn their academic subjects in what is for them a second language.

The teaching assignments may be bet-

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ter understood against a brief description of the cultural and educational circumstances in which these Peace Corps teachers live and work. Malaya, which since my visit has become a part of Malaysia, consists of a number of federal states, each governed by a sultan. Malaya is a federation of Muslim states, using English and Malay as its official languages. However, the population is almost equally divided between Malays, Indians and Chinese who each live within their own subcultures and religious commitments. A chief problem in education is the fact that many school children, who come to school from homes where Chinese or an Indian dialect is the spoken language, are faced with the task of learning both English and the Malay language.

The secondary schools and teachers colleges I visited were located in urban areas, mainly Johore Baru, Kuala Lumpur, Ipoh, Kuala Kangsar and Penang. These cities are not hardship assignments for Peace Corps volunteers. The cities are charming blends of the old and the new; the living arrangements for Peace Corps teachers are modern and comfortable; their colleagues are professionally educated, either in Malaya or in England. Most of these government schools are boarding schools, which house academically promising students who have been brought in from rural areas at government expense, and in addition they serve as a day school for local students.

While classrooms were full (30 to 40 students), they were equipped with standard furniture and chalkboards. Science laboratories were adequate and textbooks, though not always of desirable quality, were available. The students use textbooks of British origin and take examinations in third, fifth and sixth forms

which are prepared and graded in Cambridge, England.

A brief description of my procedure may help the reader to evaluate my impressions.

I followed a visiting schedule that had been carefully prepared by Lewis Butler, the very able and sensitive Peace Corps Director for Malaya. I would arrive at a school where I was met by the Peace Corps teacher or teachers, meet the headmaster, go on a tour of the school and usually end up in the faculty room. Here I could observe the Peace Corps teachers in interaction with their colleagues and could chat with Malayan teachers. Then I would hold a private interview with the Peace Corps teacher, usually on a person-to-person basis, although in several instances I talked with several people at one time. Generally we managed to leave the school for these interviews. We met for breakfast or tea at the hotel where I was staying or I would go to a local restaurant with them, eating, for example, Chinese sharks' fin soup or Malayan curries and rice.

My major objective was to conduct an open-ended interview that would permit the Peace Corps teacher to structure the content himself. I tried very hard to avoid "loading" the interview in the direction of my primary concern—the comparison of the liberal arts graduate and the professionally prepared teacher. It was my hope that the material for this comparison would emerge from the teachers' unstructured reactions. I would begin by saying, "The Peace Corps has asked me to visit with you to find out how you are getting along, what your problems are, what you wish you had had as preparation, so that they can do a better job of helping the next group." We chatted about how they liked Malaya, where they lived, who their friends

were and the nature of their social life. Then we talked about their teaching—their classes, their successes, their problems, their needs.

Impressions of the Volunteers

Out of these experiences, a number of impressions emerge. The Peace Corps volunteers I met are a very personable group. They are young (between 23 and 30 years of age) serious, sensitive men and women who are keenly aware of their responsibilities as representatives of American democracy. This was reflected in one young man's problem. The only Englishman on the staff was actively seeking his friendship. The Peace Corps teacher realized that Europeans must not establish what might appear to be an ingroup. He was pondering a way to explain his Peace Corps role to his English friend.

Another teacher (a liberal arts B.A.) wished she were a more skilled teacher so that she could better represent American education. All these Peace Corps volunteers wished with deep sincerity to represent the best of American culture and values while at the same time being honest in explaining our shortcomings when challenged on such topics as segregation.

It was my feeling that all these young Americans were functioning as effective people. They seemed at ease in their schools, friendly with their colleagues and enjoying many friendships with Malaysians of all three cultures. A number of times Malaysian teachers told me how their attitudes toward Americans had been changed as a result of their acquaintance with Peace Corps volunteers. Distressing incidents were told to me of the behavior of some American tourists and salesmen, which, added to

the blood-and-thunder American movies that are shown, have created some stereotypes of Americans as crude, selfish and insensitive individuals.

As I moved from school to school, from one city to another, I had a growing sense of pride in these young Americans as products of American education. For, regardless of what sections of the U.S.A. they came from, they were all very discontented with the outmoded British colonial system of education in Malaya. They all complained that the only motivation for learning in their classes was the necessity to pass the Cambridge examinations. Students may take these examinations regardless of their school grades. They often are indifferent to assignments and passive about learning anything except that which seems instrumental to passing examinations. The Peace Corps teachers were unanimous in their desire to instill a love of learning for its own sake and to stimulate curiosity and initiative in their students.

Their problem is epitomized in the following incident: One fifth form science class, which was studying the mammalian skeleton, proposed that since there had never been an examination question on the skull, they should omit study of the skull!

The dilemma of these teachers lies in the very grim reality of the examination system which is the gateway to higher education in Malaya, and on the other hand, the crucial need of the nation for better educated young adults. Many Peace Corps volunteers were struggling to meet both needs. It was at this point that professional teacher preparation was an obvious advantage. Typically, the professional teacher knew more ways to prepare students efficiently for the examinations *and then go beyond the min-*

imum curriculum. They had more techniques for involving students in inquiry, exploration and in individual projects. In one instance, in the Business College, the American director encouraged his Peace Corps teachers to use a functional approach to teaching, in contrast to traditional memoriter methods. A recent report on results of their national examinations demonstrated that a functional approach was effective in terms of examination scores.

Peace Corps teachers feel a deep obligation to conform to the expectations of the Malayan educational system, while at the same time they hope to add American techniques and procedures to the repertoire of their schools. This hope is also voiced by a number of headmasters who told me, sometimes wistfully, that they greatly admired American teaching techniques and materials (especially in science) and hoped that the Peace Corps teachers would influence their schools by their example.

It was this expectation that proved a source of frustration and anxiety to some of the Peace Corps volunteers. Several of them told me very earnestly that they felt they were a disappointment to their headmasters. They were liberal arts graduates in science with no professional teacher education. As one young woman put it, "My headmaster, who is an exceedingly well-trained science teacher himself, looked forward to my coming to his staff so that he could have a skilled teacher demonstrating American science teaching. Actually, I did not know how to teach. At first, all I could do was put material on the board and have the students copy it. If I had not had his skilled help, I could not have succeeded."

She went on to say that in the past she had considered education courses "Mickey Mouse" but now she wished

she had taken them. She was a charming, intelligent young woman who, in spite of these lacks, was making a teaching contribution with the support of a very able headmaster, who appreciated her qualities and declared he would like more Peace Corps teachers.

Practices and Problems

As I interviewed these fine, serious young people, they individually enumerated a number of the same conclusions and reflected certain common practices and problems. I believe these can be summarized as valid impressions:

1. The Peace Corps teachers are functioning in highly acceptable ways as persons in Malayan life and on teaching faculties. They are changing the image of "Americans" in Malaya.

2. There are "naturals" among the inexperienced teachers who do exceedingly well with most of their students.

3. Most inexperienced teachers tend to comply with the traditional curriculum and procedures and do not know what to do with students who do not learn through this program. As one mathematics major put it, "I don't know what to do with those students who are not gifted!"

4. The inexperienced teachers typically "get by" in schools where teacher preparation has been low and where their obviously better knowledge of their subject fields is an advantage. Yet when inexperienced teachers are placed on sophisticated faculties, they become aware of their own lack of professional training. Many of them like teaching and are now planning further professional education when they return to the United States.

5. The experienced teachers are able to go beyond minimal and traditional procedures because of greater versatility in teaching. They tend to be more frustrated by the memoriter emphasis and less willing to settle for it.

6. Almost all these Peace Corps teachers listed a number of the following needs:

a. To know more about the American educational system so that they could answer questions of colleagues

b. To know how to make varied lesson plans

c. To know how to reach passive students

d. To make laboratory work more interesting

e. To know more about teaching problem solving procedures

f. To know how to group students and how to prepare different procedures for various groups

g. To know how to adapt their secondary teaching to techniques of the upper elementary school—learning how to study, take notes, write simple compositions, etc.

h. To have more American resource materials to supplement the official texts

i. To overcome the difficult task of learning in a second language (English)

j. To know how to look for subtle cues in pupil behavior

k. To have experienced resource people to consult with from time to time.

7. Some of the problems they faced were:

a. Inadequate text materials. American textbooks are greatly admired by their colleagues. One Chinese Malayan teacher told me, "I have learned so much about enriching my teaching from K —— (an experienced teacher) and from her wonderful textbooks."

b. Teaching science without a laboratory and standard equipment (in a girls' school).

c. Overcoming superstitions without violating the culture (in one school a rumor spread that ghosts had invaded the school and the entire school was closed while the proper religious official exorcised the ghosts).

d. Coping with the tradition of memoriter learning. There is the anecdote of the teacher who put notes on the board for students to copy and then left for the faculty room. He noticed that one boy was not

copying the notes. On inquiry the boy replied, "I have my father's notes." "Oh," said the teacher, "that's all right, then."

e. Teaching with poor textbooks—often a volume of ritual with gaps in important content.

f. Learning about the British colonial system of education. (It took months for the Peace Corps volunteers to catch onto the intricacies of treatment of content, etc., at the various levels.)

Pilot Programs Needed

Since returning to the U.S.A., I have reflected at length about these fine Peace Corps volunteers. They are good human beings, wonderful representatives of the United States. They are young people who wish to make significant contributions in their lifetime. Many of them have discovered the unique satisfactions to be found in teaching, and plan to enter the teaching profession when they return to the U.S.A., and to seek further preparation.

This presents an unusual opportunity to the education profession. These Peace Corps volunteers are self-selected through their goals and screened through excellent Peace Corps procedures. Furthermore, they have experienced a cross-cultural education that few of us share. They are living successfully in a very different culture. Some of them said they could happily spend their lives in Malaya. These young people will be an invaluable asset to American education.

Are we prepared to provide these young people with the further professional education they need? I believe that it would be unfortunate to put these veterans through the conventional pre-service programs. They are "experienced teachers," of a kind. They have been autonomous individuals, meeting and

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"You still haven't told me what it is with you, Mary Ann." The Professor looked at her steadily.

"You know, Professor, I was going to tell you that it's just plain laziness with me, but with those others it's lack of interest in children and their welfare. Yet I suddenly realized that the two are one and the same. And when I look at it squarely, I am ashamed because I always thought I cared about the youngsters. Yet if I really carry through logically, if I care about the youngsters, I would be giving them the very best I have to offer. And that goes for Rooms 209 and 216 and all the others too. If they really cared about those students sitting out there in front of them, they would reach out to them with love and with every ounce they could muster to see that learning takes place." Mary Ann seemed not to be speaking to the Professor any longer; she stared off into space. Suddenly the bell rang. "I must get to my class, Professor. I just don't know how to thank you for what you have done for me. I promise you I will really teach from now on."

The Professor smiled after her ruefully. Maybe Mary Ann would be a teacher after all. Maybe he would not need to tell his wife he was resigning. If he kept on caring about the students he taught and giving them all he could, constantly striving himself to be creative and inspiring, there would surely be some students who would learn and then carry on the same attitudes in their teaching. He wished he might reach out to the others too, like those in Rooms 209 and 216, to show them what they were missing, the joy to be found in caring for the students and in expressing it. Right there in the corridor of old Beacon High he determined never to cease trying to make even this change

a reality for the sake of the millions of students still to be educated.

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solving a variety of problems. They have developed sensitivities to cultural complexes that few teachers have been prepared to enter. These Peace Corps returnees should have programs designed for them that might very well become pilot models for future teacher education curricula.

I have speculated on a seminar program that parallels a teaching internship in American schools and builds its content around the needs these teachers define for themselves under the guidance of teacher education faculty members who have themselves lived in other cultures.

Remember, these young people have proved themselves under fire. Some of their trials may be reflected in the experience I faced in one of the Malayan secondary schools where the Forensics Society had asked me to speak on "Trends in American Education." The following are some of the questions these sixth form students (first year junior college, approximately) asked me:

1. You spoke of emphasis on science, mathematics and languages. Don't you think the moral and spiritual side of life is important? What is done about moral education?
2. Do you think a technological education is enough?
3. Do you have examination systems in America? How are students evaluated?

4. What do you mean by "education"?

5. Is it true that American students have "affairs"? What does that mean?

6. Do American educators believe in sex education?

7. What is happening about integration?

8. Do you have a high rate of juvenile delinquency?

Hypothesis 36—Acceptance superior to appealing

Hypothesis 37—Acceptance superior to rejecting (attacking)

Hypothesis 38—Permissiveness superior to authoritarianism

Hypothesis 39—Open communication superior to closed communication

Hypothesis 40—"Giving" methods superior to withholding.

Personal Approach—Combs

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F. Perception of Appropriate Methods: The methods teachers use must fit the kinds of people they are. An effective teacher must have an armamentarium of methods upon which he may call as these are needed to carry out his teaching duties. These may vary widely from teacher to teacher and even from moment to moment. Whatever their nature they must fit the situations and purposes of the teacher and be appropriate for the students with whom they are used.

The teacher education program must help each student find the methods best suited to him, to his purposes, his task and the peculiar populations and problems with which he must deal on the job. This is not so much a matter of *teaching* methods as one of helping students *discover* methods.

While methods must always be highly personal, certain perceptions about appropriate methods may be characteristic of good teaching. Among the hypotheses we hope to explore in this area are the following:

Hypothesis 34—Helping methods seen as superior to manipulating methods

Hypothesis 35—Cooperation superior to competition

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