

A Supervision Experiment with the Disadvantaged

IN THE junior high schools of New York City are many thousands of children who apparently live outside the cultural mainstream and who stand in need of highly specialized and skillful instruction. Our problem is compounded by the critical shortage of teachers prepared specifically to meet these extraordinary demands. To staff the special service schools, there is urgent need for teachers who are competent, creative, adaptable, sympathetic and emotionally secure, and who can feel a strong commitment to the urgent work at hand.

A large proportion of the instructors in these special schools must be recruited from the ranks of beginning teachers newly graduated from college. Because the teacher education institutions have placed increased emphasis on the overwhelming need, recent graduates have volunteered in growing numbers for service in the special schools. Yet, although the problem of teacher recruitment is abating somewhat, that of teacher retention is still crucial.

For the most part, our new teachers have had excellent preparation both in college and in the schools as student teachers. Usually, they are fired with idealism and enthusiasm for the work they face. Yet during their first days

as full fledged teachers they are dismayed by the dismal reality which confronts them.

These novices, usually with a sheltered middle class background, often find themselves incapable of understanding the behavior and the motivations of the underprivileged children they meet in the classroom. In many cases, experiential disadvantage has produced youngsters who, quite literally, do not speak the teacher's language. The teacher's "good" motives and idealism are misunderstood by the pupils. Kindness is misinterpreted as weakness. Without the support of a cooperating teacher, the classroom routines and controls of student teaching experience seem to vanish. The methodology which was so successful with more fortunate adolescents results in chaos here.

The teacher is rendered impotent by unrealistic courses of study and inappropriate instructional materials. His subject matter competence gained through years of college study is ridiculed by teen-agers who have no standards by which to judge its value. And when he

Gertrude L. Downing is Coordinator of BRIDGE: A Teacher Education Project, Queens College of the City University of New York, New York.

turns to his colleagues for support, frequently he faces the cynicism of those who have already run this gauntlet and who now take refuge in the self-justification that these pupils are "unteachable." By the end of the first year of teaching, all too often, recruits either leave the depressed area schools for more congenial surroundings or join the ranks of the cynics.

A Living Laboratory

It was to prepare teacher candidates more realistically for their vital role and to study the needs of beginning teachers in slum ghetto junior high schools that the BRIDGE project was initiated. In a representative school, ninety randomly selected pupils were assigned to classes taught by three recent Queens College graduates. With the assistance of a coordinator, these teachers will guide the selected pupils through their entire three year junior high school experience. In our "school within a school" we are scrutinizing the instructional needs of the children and the supervisory needs of the teachers.

During the early months of our first year of work, the multiplicity of problems which characterizes such a school mounted a relentless siege about our classrooms. We had three classes of disadvantaged children who, in the main, were unconvinced of the importance of learning, burdened by years of school failure, and mistrustful of authority figures. We had to meet the difficulties of adapting curriculum, adjusting methodology and securing materials on appropriate levels. Concurrently, we had to experiment with various approaches to classroom management, routines and controls while keeping pace with the required intricacies of administrative

paper work for the school. Finally, we were committed to the maintenance of a classroom atmosphere designed for long range development of verbal fluency, intellectual curiosity and individual responsibility in our pupils. Therefore, it was necessary to reconcile this with the much more rigid controls outside our classrooms which were deemed necessary for the management of the school as a whole.

To meet the many and varied needs of our ninety deprived children and our three beginning teachers, the supervisory structure has radiated at many angles from an unprepossessing hub known as Room 400. This haven was made attractive with the addition of simple curtains, pictures, posters, plants and books. It is here that the coordinator engages in the continuing struggles with curriculum, planning, ordering and reporting. Here, too, the teachers confer, plan, consult curriculum resources, type plans, ditto materials, have coffee together, and give vent to the frustrations and successes, the pathos and humor of the day. It is here, also, that the children receive the initial guidance, discipline and encouragement of which they stand in such desperate need. It is here that parents come and reveal glimpses of seemingly unendurable burdens and intricately snarled human relationships.

Structure of Supervision

Conferences

We have found it well to organize the many ramifications of our work around a framework of weekly conferences. Each Monday, we have a case study conference attended by all our teachers and the coordinator as well as the project psychologist and the school

guidance counselor.¹ During each meeting, which is carefully structured and is based on previously and independently written reports by each of the participants, one child is studied in detail. The meeting culminates in the formulation of practical recommendations for action in the classroom by the teachers as well as for follow-up by medical and social agencies where necessary.

Our second meeting of the week is a group conference devoted to such matters as general administrative directives, common curriculum problems, and correlation of instruction in the various subject areas. In addition, difficulties in interpersonal relationships are aired and are mended here before pressures wear the fabric too thin.

The final general meeting each week is devoted to a discussion of reading instruction. At this time, pupil needs are examined and pupil progress is evaluated. Specific aims are set up for developmental instruction during the following week. Means are devised for reinforcing the reading skills in the various subject areas by all the teachers, and appropriate instructional materials are suggested.

In addition to our three group conferences, each teacher is scheduled for an individual conference with the coordinator. To utilize time effectively, these periods are organized to include a review of the teacher's work of the past week as indicated by his written plans and by his observed classroom activities. This is followed by cooperative planning of his projected work, both immediate and long range. The hour is terminated

¹ During the first two years of the project demonstration, the development of these conferences has been promoted greatly by the participation of the College Committee: Leonard Kornberg, Director; Robert Edgar, Albert Harris, and Helen Storen.

by a consultation on specific teacher problems.

Although all these conferences are indispensable to our work, many of the most important revelations and enduring decisions are made during the daily incidental conferences which grow out of our "team" relationship. In Room 400, while running the ditto machine or munching a cookie or making a chart, we can share the most urgent problems before they have lost their immediacy and can arrive at group unanimity in informal and open exchange.

Classroom Participation

A large part of the coordinator's time has been spent in the classrooms, not as an observer but as a participant. At the outset of our work it was essential to provide the maximum support and assistance to our teachers. In order to do this, the coordinator deliberately defined her role, in part, as that of an auxiliary teacher in the classrooms. She participated in group discussions, shared instructional duties with the teacher when procedures needed bolstering, and occasionally taught entire lessons for demonstration. The pupils grew accustomed quickly to the coordinator's perambulations and accepted her as a natural part of the school organization.

From time to time, we have engaged in our own interpretation of team teaching, with the coordinator (a reading specialist) handling the general presentation of a lesson and the aspects requiring reading skills, and the teacher providing instruction in all learnings related specifically to his content area specialization.

This aspect of in-service education has met with gratifying success, for although

(Continued on page 455)

selves effectively to the question of meeting the needs of our children as we enter the Space Age. But the great educational task lying ahead cannot be done by school people alone. It will require a mobilization of all societal forces which have the power to influence, for only through the combined efforts of a community's total resources can a concept of education be perpetuated that is dynamic enough to insure the survival of a democratic society in a free America.

Supervision Experiment—Downing

(Continued from page 435)

coordinator demonstration and intervention were frequent during the first months of the project, they have decreased steadily as teacher security and competence have grown. This writer believes that three factors have contributed to this success. First, there is no substitute for actual demonstration of methodology in its natural context and at an appropriate time. Second, it was found possible to provide this instruction in a manner which did not diminish the professional stature of the teacher. Finally, the relationship of the coordinator to the teachers was supportive rather than threatening, since she has an evaluative rather than a rating function. Her role, in large part, is one of leading the teacher to examine his own successes and failures and to strive for higher professional competence.

Observed Results

We have now passed the halfway mark of our project. Our teachers are no longer raw recruits, but are tried veterans of an exhausting campaign. They have shown impressive growth in their understanding of disadvantaged adolescents. They have become increasingly

proficient in teaching techniques, skilled at the adaptation of subject matter, and creative in finding and in developing materials of instruction. Because, in the inevitable moments of exhaustion and frustration, the members of the team have relied constantly upon each other for support and for understanding, group loyalty and solidarity have developed steadily. The long range relationship with our pupils and awareness of their tremendous needs have produced in our teachers a strong devotion to the children.

Of course, the true measure of our work will be made in the future. Only then will we learn whether, as a concomitant to building professional competence, we have succeeded in developing commitment to this vital teaching task.

Editorial—Drummond

(Continued from page 422)

What can we of this generation do to free the minds and capacities of the current crop of youngsters so that they will be more able and more willing to cope with the problems of their day than we seem to be with ours?

Now is not the time to turn our backs on the underlying basis of American education—local boards of education. Neither is it a time to worship ineffectual idols of a departed past, such as a nine-month school term. We need to continue in our land—through discussion and dialogue and action—the quest for better communities, including better schools, so that growing up in America will result in fewer casualties and many more successes.

—HAROLD D. DRUMMOND, *Chairman, Department of Elementary Education, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque; President-Elect, ASCD.*

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