

## Enriching Laboratory Experiences

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**I**MPROVING laboratory experiences for students enrolled in the teacher education program of a college is a major concern of all faculty members who are responsible for the design of such a program. The quality of the present program, of course, is always under scrutiny. There is, however, a continuing attempt to improve both the range and the quality of the opportunities for experience.

The college calendar and that of the laboratory school or public schools used for laboratory experiences seldom coordinate very neatly. Students, therefore, rarely have an opportunity to see groups of children and their teachers during the first few days of the session or at the close of school. While this deficiency is recognized and lip service is given to the need for doing something about it, little seems to have come of such a resolve.

### **An Informal Approach**

Two years ago I undertook to find out whether an informal approach might yield results and thus enrich the laboratory experiences of students enrolled in the elementary

education program at Arkansas Polytechnic College. In the late spring of 1965 I brought together those students who were to do student teaching during one of the semesters of the following year. After pointing out that the children and their teacher would have been working together for several weeks or even months before the arrival of the student teacher, I suggested that each of the students should make an opportunity for himself to spend the beginning school days in a public school.

We discussed the need to make the initial contact with a principal or superintendent and to obtain the teacher's consent to the arrangement. Courtesy demanded also that the school office should know of the student teacher's arrival and departure. Since students would probably spend varying lengths of time in the school, schedule arrangements were to be made by the individual students, as circumstances permitted.

In mid-August each student received a reminder letter. Then I waited to see whether the interest and dedication of the spring had endured through the summer or had become a casualty of vacation lethargy. When college classes convened in September,

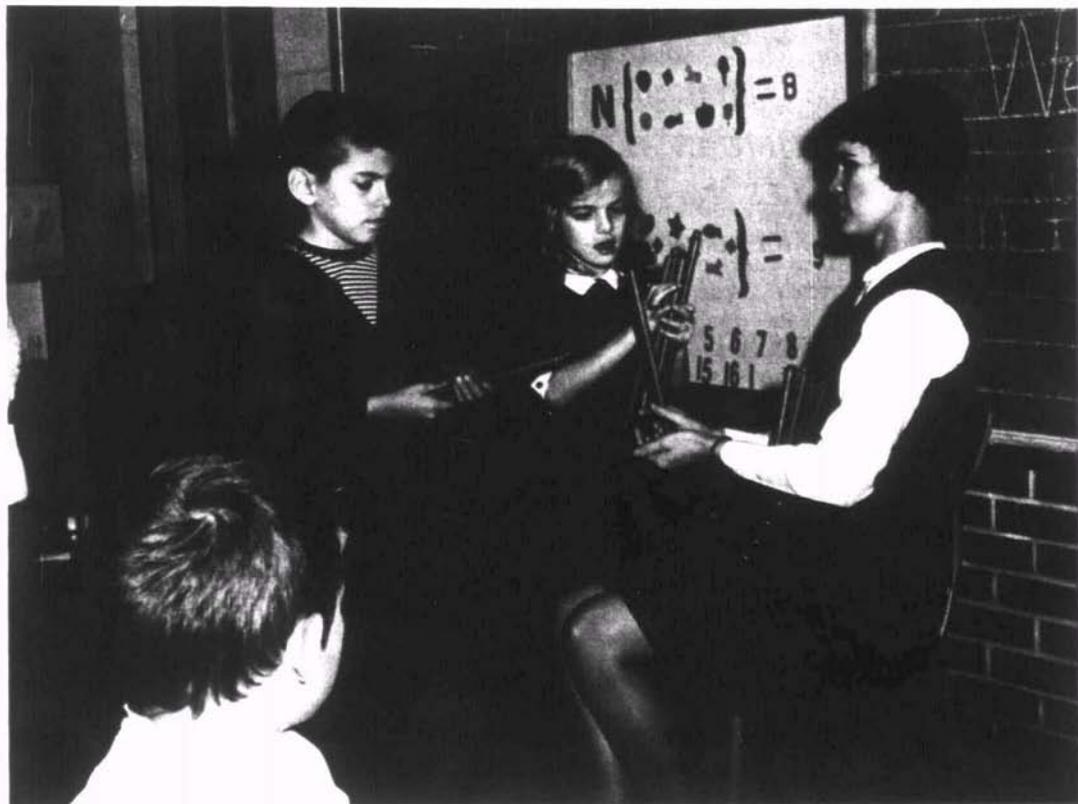
each student was asked to write a report of his own experience.

The material that follows seems to give evidence of the value of the experiment. Moreover, the extensive evaluation and the comments by the students indicated that they felt that the time was profitably spent. In many cases they recommended that the experience be made a regular feature of the elementary education program.

Students worked with Grades 1 to 6 inclusively. A school in the remote Ozark mountains area was represented; so was the small-town school, the rural consolidated school, and a city system with 22 elementary schools. One young man on military duty in southern Louisiana asked and received permission from his commanding officer to leave the post, when he was not on duty, to observe in one of the public schools.

## Range of Duties

The duties of the students varied greatly. Students had an opportunity to become acquainted with some of the activities that soon would be their responsibilities. The activities in which they engaged were of two kinds: accomplishing routine duties and helping children individually or in small groups. The activities included checking books in the classroom library, making a folder for each child, attaching a name sticker to each child's locker, making name tags for the children, checking art and physical education supplies, taking globes, maps, and record players out of the storage room, compiling information on 3 x 5 cards for each child, helping issue state-adopted textbooks, typing and mimeographing notes to parents, helping children find the rooms to



which they were to report, and collecting fees.

Other duties involved helping individual pupils with "just about everything," reading a story to the group, accompanying children on errands, directing outdoor games, helping children locate library books, repeating instructions to individuals who had not understood them, showing children how to hold a pencil, helping left-handed children with their writing.

This experience also gave the student a chance to observe the interaction between teacher and children during these early days together, and to gain some awareness of the planning that must take place before the children arrive. The students saw teachers discussing with children tentative plans for the semester's work, introducing children to cooks, janitors, and other non-teaching personnel, planning with children for classroom policies and procedures, discussing with the group the role of the principal, looking over children's permanent records which included samples of work, making charts dictated by the group, welcoming children who had not been in the school previously.

## First Days at School

The students were also sensitive to the children's reactions. They reported that the children seemed excited and happy, giving the impression that they were glad to be back in school. The pupils became interested in their own name tags and those of their classmates; tried to follow instructions; seemed full of energy and questions; were relieved that they could remember their seats when they returned on the second day; and they showed great shyness.

To give the flavor of the experience, a few direct quotations from the papers of the students are included here:

- You read about these things in books,

but nothing will drive home the point like experiencing it at firsthand.

- Some hadn't written during the whole summer or hadn't held a pencil. Some really had to think before they wrote their name.

- One child in the first grade could read anything he picked up. He could read science books and easily recognized such words as "waterproof," "sprinkle," and "preened."

- Not only did I view individual differences in the children, but also in the teachers. In addition, I saw that in reality not all teachers have the same philosophy of teaching at all. I heard and saw many different teachers and yet my philosophy was different from theirs.

- The children who had attended Head Start were more advanced in many ways. They played better with the other children on the playground. Also they called their teacher Mrs. Brown, not just "teacher."

- No student can visualize the numerous and various jobs that are necessary the first week of school.

- I thought that the majority of the class would be unhappy because their summer vacation had ended, but they seemed as if they were looking forward to school opening.

- I felt a glow of helpfulness and accomplishment.

Already the student teachers who are now juniors are asking whether they will have a chance to go into a public school in the fall. They will.

Looking at the whole picture, it seems obvious that when young men and women are challenged with the initiation and accomplishment of a project that has meaning for them and potential for helping them to become more effective teachers, they will be overwhelmingly responsive. Thus they will enrich their own professional background and improve the teacher education program of the college in which they are enrolled.

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