

When the deprived and the affluent live together . . .

THE CAMELOT

"I enjoyed the trip to Frost Valley because I found out that just because a person's skin color is different from yours it doesn't mean you can't have fun with him. Also, what made the trip a success was our surroundings. We were surrounded by mountains and forests."

"I learned the difference between Great Neck and J.H.S. 118. They listen to different records and they dance different, they even talk with a different accent. I think this is all because they live in a very different environment. I learned to live with people I never knew before or saw before. I learned how to be responsible in my own way."—Alfred

"I never have in my life had a lot of conversation with people about how my life has been and how different it is from small towns."—Shorty

"I had never had a chance to go climbing mountains and crossing cable bridges before."—Eddie

THESE words were the written comments of some of the 28 ninth year boys and girls in the Camelot Program of the Wm. W. Niles J.H.S. 118, Bronx, New York City, who participated in a trip to Frost Valley, New York, during the week of April 17, 1972. We were very much moved by the written and oral comments, and we were delighted by the interaction that took place between two groups of youngsters whose environment, way of life, and even language were different.

This trip may have been a "first" of an urban and suburban students' country get-together.

The Camelot Program at Niles Junior High School is an experimental program which is designed to meet the needs of 45 potential dropouts. It is a classroom without walls, which has its own curriculum essentially independent of the mainstream of the school. The purposes are to give boys and girls a flexible program which will allow them to explore, free of customary curricular restraints, areas of study in which they are interested; to progress at their own rate of speed; to develop innate talents; to relate to one another as human beings; and to assume responsibility for their actions. The taste of success, which had been an elusive thing for the past nine years for these students, is the psychological key to their future. This program has provided success for the first time for many of them during this first experimental year at the school.

Niles Junior High School is located in one of the most deprived pockets of New York City. A densely populated area, with streets littered with abandoned cars, garbage, broken bottles, bent cans, and telephone wires strung with abandoned swinging sneakers. Good people live here, struggling to bring up their children with values, morals, and dignity—good people struggling on meager salaries or on welfare, fighting to keep their

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children away from the drug addicts, the pushers, the muggers, and the gangs. Sixty-five percent are of Puerto Rican background; the remainder are Black.

Working within the environment of the alternate classroom, the four teachers assigned to the program served the dual role of teachers and guidance advisors. These teachers, Eugene Scher, Richard Acosta, Susan Fauer, and Paul Bablove, are licensed in the academic areas of mathematics, social studies, Spanish, science, and English; but above all, they have qualities to which these students readily responded: warmth, interest, and dedication.

The lives of the students outside of school are circumscribed by the neighborhood they live in. They rarely go outside of these boundaries—except for occasional family trips to New Jersey, Connecticut, or to a nearby beach. The teachers have taken them to places of interest all over the city during the school day. However, when the teachers brought up the subject of a big trip away from home, the students' excitement was tremendous. When the teachers approached us with the idea, we quickly computed the cost of such a trip and were quite discouraged by the fact that it seemed to be a financial impossibility. The idea and the meaning it had for the students persisted, however, so we began to search for a solution to the problem.

An Exchange

Eight years ago an exchange was initiated between Great Neck North J.H.S.¹ and Wm. W. Niles J.H.S. Annually a group of students from each school would visit the other's school and spend two days together exchanging ideas and opinions on current issues and problems. They would visit classes, lunch together, and participate in special programs arranged for the day.

For the past few years, we had found an increasing demand for a more extensive exchange. Although there were follow-up visits on weekends, these were always difficult to effect because we did not have money for transportation costs.

When the teachers and supervisors involved met over a weekend to make the usual plans for the 1972 exchange, a unanimous desire for a week-long experience was expressed. We explored all the possibilities of such outings, but the cost of transportation seemed prohibitive. Finally, someone came up with the idea of using one bus trip to the country and staying somewhere for an entire week. This was the answer to our problem.

¹ Great Neck is just outside New York City and is a relatively affluent suburb.

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Questions	Most Numerous Answers of 30 Niles Participants
1. High point for you	1. Meeting new people, pillow fights, hikes, making new friends
2. Low point for you	2. Coming home (unanimous)
3. Rank three things you liked	3. Varied response—covered all the activities
4. Rank three things you didn't like	4. Coming home, nothing, rules about getting up or going to bed
5. List three things you missed most from home	5. Parents, sibling, nothing
6. A person you met and why you liked him	6. Varied, but names of several individuals were mentioned by as many as five people for being "nice," "free-minded," "funny," "friendly"
7. How do you feel about your teachers after spending a week with them?	7. They are human beings, fun to be with
8. Three things you learned	8. Varied—"how to get along with people," "how to climb a mountain," "not all whites are bad," "not everyone looks for trouble," "people are people," "friendly people make you happy inside"
9. Did this trip help you to get along with strangers?	9. Unanimous variety of "yes" and "let's do it again"
10. How did you feel about not watching TV?	10. Unanimous "didn't miss it"

Figure 1. Student Reactions to the Camelot Program

Arrangements began to take shape for a trip to Frost Valley.²

From December 1971 to March 1972 there were meetings, telephone conversations, discussions, and planning. We all spent a weekend at Frost Valley to get acquainted with the terrain, the camp, and its facilities, and to block out the activities for 60 boys and girls who would spend the week there.

Our greatest problem was a financial one, but we were able to overcome that because a local department store and our school district gave us money. The students themselves held cake sales, decorated bottles and sold them, and saved their money so that they could pay part of their own expense. The Camelot teachers called parents who were reluctant to give their children permission to take a five-day trip away from home. This was particularly true for the girls. The teachers visited homes and assured parents that their children would be safe.

Bill Devlin, director of the YMCA Camp, visited both schools. He showed color slides and told students and parents what the camp was like, what activities and facilities were available. The excitement generated by all the activities and the anticipation of the trip was almost too much for the students. They

were proud of their ability to raise one-fourth of the cost of the trip,³ a little fearful of leaving their homes and families for a week, and a little uncertain about what to expect from the Great Neck students.

Finally the day came, and the students arrived with bags, cameras, playing cards, and goodies to eat on the trip. The teachers arrived with their totes, cameras, recorders, videotape machines, basketballs, and sundry items. A word must be said about the teachers at this point. All of them left behind wives or husbands and children and many personal responsibilities, and literally gave of themselves 24 hours a day. They had promised to watch over these boys and girls, so they took four-hour shifts during the night for the entire week. Many a night a teacher would spend time with a boy or girl, just sitting in front of a warm fire, and talking and listening person to person.

The Niles boys and girls arrived at Frost Valley first and waited anxiously for their companions of the week. The Great Neck group arrived and looked uneasily at the Niles group. Two separate camps formed, and this was not to be overcome for 24 hours. They were put to work unpacking and exploring the immediate grounds. Small prob-

² Frost Valley YMCA Camp; Bill Devlin, Director.

³ The cost of the trip was \$42, including bus fare per student.

lems arose about who was going to share a room with whom. Teachers helped to smooth things over, but the feeling of two separate groups remained.

The first day's activities involved some games, exploring, orientation, and meals. The seating arrangements at the tables were designed to mix the groups. Preplanned activities were scheduled for those who were interested. Boys and girls signed up for activities that interested them. Many activities that were not on schedule developed spontaneously. The teachers then wisely abandoned the schedule because as this began to happen, the wall between the two camps began breaking down.

One of the first things to bring them closer together was the common danger in climbing ice-slippery mountains. It was here that each would put out a helping hand to steady the other. This was the start. The real exchange took place when they returned to the dorms and sat around the fire, listening to one another and talking to one another about their lives, their plans, their parents, their school, their hopes. New ideas came forth and new worlds opened up.

Evaluating the Program

Our feeling is that the Frost Valley trip gave us an opportunity to see the achievement of some of the major goals that we had for this experimental year with our classroom without walls. We had known these boys and girls for two years before they were put into this alternate schooling project, and we had worked with a number of them in a Values Clarification class.⁴ Therefore, we were in a position to notice changes when the students returned. We called them all together after their return, and we were immediately aware that many of the students seemed more articulate, more self-assured, and more satisfied to be in school.

We believe that these changes probably had been taking place gradually because of the Camelot program, but this week away

seemed to make them blossom forth in a quantum jump. It is unusual to see these youngsters happy and enthusiastic about anything in school. They were bubbling over with excitement and pleasure. Since then they have been kissing and hugging us when they meet us in the neighborhood, and they offer signs of these feelings—walking along with us, insisting on carrying our packages and school portfolios, gossiping about their nonschool activities and plans.

We called all the teachers and pupils to the informal discussion room to talk about the trip and to answer some questions anonymously. The questions we gave them and a summary of their responses are shown in Figure 1.

The girls and boys were eager to answer all questions raised. Those slower at writing stayed after the others had gone to finish their questionnaires, even though they were not asked or even encouraged to do so. They insisted on doing so, which, in itself, was most unusual. Later, when asked by their teachers to write a short expression of their feelings about the trip for their Camelot newspaper, they did so immediately and enthusiastically. The writing was of better quality than we were used to seeing from them. We believe that our whole experience with their reaction reinforces the notion that when pupils know their feelings and want to express them—have something to say—they will express themselves far better than their usual school performance, and they are happy to do so. We witnessed a dramatic example of this.

The Exchange Week contacts continued during the months following via letters, telephone calls, and weekend visits and outings. Such activity naturally brought about communications between parents. The culmination occurred when Richard Sherman, principal of Great Neck North Junior High School, was invited to be the speaker for our graduation and the Great Neck boys and girls were also invited to come with him, to attend the ceremony, and to participate in a reception afterward so that they could meet the parents of the Niles pupils. The universal reaction of all witnesses of these events has

⁴ See: Louis E. Raths, Merrill Harmin, and Sidney B. Simon. *Values and Teaching*. Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1966.

been a genuine feeling of friendship, love, and caring despite initial fears caused by knowledge of differences in background and resources.

We would like to share with you the feelings and thoughts of the Camelot teachers and some of the parents about the week in the country. They, too, had a learning experience. One reaction follows:

There were a number of goals that we had hoped to accomplish by taking our students to Frost Valley. We wanted them to discover that they could learn outside of the traditional classroom, that learning could be an enjoyable experience, that there is a different type of life outside of the ghetto and, most important, that white children are no different from black children. I feel that we achieved every one of our goals. It would be very difficult to determine the exact degree to which we were successful, but if tears at departure were an accurate indicator, then there is no doubt that this experience was a most successful one.

It was gratifying to see young people from different ethnic and social backgrounds making an attempt to get to know each other better, to give each other a chance. These children can now be looked at by society as an example of what human relations could and should be like. —E. Scher

Our conclusion is that no amount of busing can take the place of living together for five days. The first day and a half was spent in armed cautiousness, suspicion, and fear on both sides. However, once the "ice was broken" and the students began to mix in pillow fights, eating, playing pool, hikes, and rap sessions held through the night, they learned a great deal from each other about the problems that face a democratic society, and they learned about these problems on a personal level they could understand. They

were excited when talking about their own lives with someone who did not know about them. One boy said, "I never looked at my life the way I had to in answering their questions." Another said, "You really don't know a person until you share a room with him." Another, "I regret I found out how nice they were too late." A girl said, "I think it is beautiful finding out that you don't have to be a friend for a long time to be a friend." Another said, "I feel all people who don't get along are missing something."

To answer the argument that these pupils are not ready for such an experience, or that it causes discontent, or that a one-shot experience has no significance, we can only say that these generalizations were not true for the Frost Valley trip. New vistas were opened, contacts were made and continued, prejudices were shaken and questioned by experiences—all proving that much learning takes place outside the classroom. Students need experiences outside their own environment and with others different from them. There must be less talking about what to do and more doing it.

We learned that there is high performance and there are no discipline problems when pupils are learning what they regard as exciting to know.

We wonder how long it is going to take teachers to revitalize their teaching using the powerful motivating forces of attitudes and emotion in sparking learning.

We wonder when things that are entrenched in schools because they have always been there will have to prove themselves as worthy of continuance.

We wonder if going to the country together will become a regular part of the curriculum. □

Future ASCD Annual Conferences

1973	March 17-21	Minneapolis	<i>Minneapolis Auditorium</i>
1974	March 9-13	Anaheim	<i>Anaheim Convention Center</i>
1975	March 15-19	New Orleans	<i>Rivergate</i>
1976	March 14-17	Miami Beach	<i>Convention Center</i>

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