

*Diversion,
Incursion,
or
Immersion?*

Using Community Resources



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MANY elementary and secondary schools in large cities are literally insulated from the community of which they are a part. They are pedagogical islands, cut off from the community and its resources. The inhabitants of these islands, teachers, administrators, and students alike, rarely venture out during school hours. To be sure, they read about the surrounding world in books, and they return to live on the mainland when school is out. But few urban schools have built bridges over which people may freely pass back and forth between school and community to exchange the invaluable resources each possesses.

Students have great difficulty understanding why they are shut up in classrooms while the real world hums and clatters and shouts outside. They submit because the pressure to keep them there is intense. While they are given to understand that the two worlds are connected, the evidence in terms of educational practice is that they are not.

Periodic projects which do utilize community resources through incursions of students into the community or resource people into the classroom are, all too often, viewed as diversionary activities rather than as learning experiences. Their use frequently serves merely as a break in the routine, not as a purposeful instructional activity.

This is due in part to the fact that traditional programs utilizing community resources invariably involve entire classrooms of children rather than individual students. Twenty-five to forty children, functioning as a total unit, are taken on field trips to local industrial plants, historical sites, or cultural activities. Resource people come into the school to address large groups of children, in their classrooms or at assembly programs, or present documentary or audio-visual materials for use by the entire class to study a subject of current interest. Even the seemingly innovative programs fashioned after Philadelphia's Parkway Project approach the

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use of resources in much the same way. Students do spend their days in classrooms located in the community and often find that their instructors are affiliated with the organization or agency which is providing facilities for the class. However, in most situations students are still relating as a total, cohesive unit to the resource.

Expanding Present Programs

While there is a place for the traditional field trip, resource person, and community-based educational project, these approaches tend to be superficial, offer little or no alternatives for individualized learning, and do not tap those resources which would make possible prolonged exposure to the community and in-depth learning. They utilize resources to learn about the community, and not from it, through detached observation of environmental resources and community activities rather than through direct "hands-on" experiences.

Improvement and expansion of present programs and the development of new ones depend on an entirely different view of the types of activities which can be developed around resources available to the school from its local community. Only when teachers and administrators begin to perceive the community as a learning resource for individuals rather than entire classes will they really be able to exploit the local community for meaningful educational experiences. Every community has within it individuals who can open doors to vivid learning experiences. The butcher, the baker, and the candlestick maker, the scientist, artist, lawyer, businessman, local druggist, and housewife. All of these, and many, many more, are the community's human resources waiting to be utilized by the enterprising teacher and school administrator to enrich the school program.¹

In most instances, it is not possible for large groups of children to utilize these local resources effectively. Yet these same re-

sources could be made readily available for use by individual students who could spend a day, or a week, or even a month, working directly with a community person at his work place, be it the kitchen of the local gourmet cook, the office of a civic association planning a project of community concern, the studio of a local artist, or the construction site of a building being put up in the community.

In each case children would be given the opportunity to serve an apprenticeship with someone in the community who is directly involved in an activity which is vital to the life of that community. Students would be living their learning experiences immersed in the community, relating what they learn to how the members of their community survive and thrive. The major objective would be the solution of problems which the student wants to attack.

Building on Experience

These local human community resources cannot be effectively utilized, however, unless the classroom is viewed as a headquarters from which children operate. The entire community must become an open classroom in which students live and experience their environment through the people who work and live in it. The development within the young of attitudes and dispositions which will make it possible for them to survive in an urban society can best take place through the intermediary of the local community and its resources. The local community will be educative to the degree that individuals share common activities.

A pioneering effort utilizing this approach was that of the South Orangetown School District in Rockland County, New York, where in the early 1960's professionals in the community worked with individual students in living rooms, cellars, laboratories, and even station wagons. Resource people included musicians, lawyers, publishers, neuro-paleontologists, seismologists, and sculptors.²

² David Mallery. "A Community-School Venture." *Top Professionals Work with Students*. Boston: National Association of Independent Schools, 1963. p. 27.

¹ Edward G. Olsen. *School and Community*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1954. p. 188.

More recently, we find students from Stadium High School in Tacoma, Washington, spending half the day for six weeks in judges' chambers, banks, computer centers, retail stores, motels, government offices, nursery schools, newspapers, and the district's own elementary schools.³ Seniors from Winston Churchill High School in Montgomery County, Maryland, volunteered to participate in an extended experience program and spent two to three periods each day working in law and newspaper offices, in social work, teaching, and medical fields.⁴ Five Wilmington, Delaware, high school students served a one-year apprenticeship in studios of professional artists in the community.⁵ In each case students worked directly with community people, learning while living real life experiences.

Unfortunately, these examples are

³ Laurel N. Tanner and Daniel Tanner. "News Notes." *Educational Leadership* 29 (7): 647; April 1972.

⁴ Laurel N. Tanner and Daniel Tanner. "News Notes." *Educational Leadership* 28 (1): 111; October 1970.

⁵ Laurel N. Tanner and Daniel Tanner. "News Notes." *Educational Leadership* 28 (2): 259; November 1970.

widely scattered, rarely take place in large cities, and usually only involve a handful of high school students. On the whole, school systems in urban communities have not offered community-based learning experiences for individual pupils. Despite the interest in urban education and the need to involve students in the solution of urban problems, urban systems have tended to stay away from an individualized apprenticeship approach to local community resources.

Certainly the experiences of the past decade have brought the realization that the solution to the intricate problems facing urban schools demands a diversification of the school program and the assistance of every willing member of the community. The school program should be built upon a regard for the particular abilities of each individual, and at the same time must be focused on the larger problem of how each student can best be helped to live in and contribute to his community. Schools must begin to vary and individualize their relationships with local community resources so that they can most effectively utilize every opportunity to offer students valuable in-depth learning experiences. □

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