

# *Early Bird Guidance*

**ZENOBIA M. JOHNSON**

**I**N SEPTEMBER 1969 a program called "Early Bird Guidance" was designed by the principal and faculty of an elementary school serving a large, urban, disadvantaged area in New Orleans, Louisiana. This program was planned in response to one of the most deep-seated and crippling problems that black children experience in elementary school—negative self-concept.

The program has been in effect three years. It still has enough momentum from kindergartners and from pupils in grades 1 through 6 to continue another year. Because of pupil enthusiasm, the staff thought that other elementary schools might like to share the experience. Sometimes that which evokes creativity in a particular group of children is an indicator of how other youngsters similarly situated might react.

### **Sensing the Problem**

In the United States, self-image of the Afro-American child is usually negative. Birth conditions, cultural patterns, and deprivation are some of the major factors which contribute to this attitude.

The ill effects of these conditions tend to limit the chances of most black youngsters to become productive, contributing citizens

of our democracy. This poses a real stumbling block in the education process. Schools are forced to recognize the challenge.

Yet the crippling effect on the child's personality and his own self-esteem is the real tragedy. Dramatic and dynamic measures are needed to attack the problem. Early Bird Guidance is one school's effort to lend its input to a viable solution. The staff recognizes the effort as only an introductory approach to a serious problem. The enormous task of changing in some cases, and enriching in others, a black child's self-image should be prerequisite not only for schools but for all of society.

### **Preliminary Planning**

In the school's pre-opening conference of teachers, parents, and community leaders, an experimental plan was suggested. Staff members believed this plan to be simple and workable. Children would be exposed daily to black Americans with whom they could identify in a positive manner. Development of black pride through self-achievement was one objective. The plan was to move slowly so that pupils could grasp one good idea before going to another.

The plan which evolved met with



The Early Bird Guidance Program is designed to develop a positive self-concept in black children.

skepticism. It appeared to be a Mini Black Studies Curriculum. Black studies had not yet been inculcated into the traditional course of study. No one had the authority to alter the course of study without permission from the Department of Instruction of the city school system. The discussions brought to light the state board of education's policy which required definite time allotments for specific subject matter areas.

Before materials and methods could be decided, the problem of time element had to be solved. The school day began and ended according to board policy. Teachers were already burdened with a crowded curriculum which allowed no free time for so-called fads and frills. Time to conduct a self-concept program in which every child could participate without infringing on teacher time became the burning issue.

Reason and compassion finally prevailed. Teachers wholeheartedly endorsed a voluntary, before school, ten-minute daily

assembly via the school's intercommunication system.

### Operation First Year

Simply stated, the plan called for teacher and parent models to select a famous black American, about whom they would give a brief biography; state his main accomplishment; tell the specific characteristic which led the individual to become famous; and make one short, concise statement of the thought to be remembered. The climax of the talk had to be a challenge which motivated each child to think of one thing he could do that day which would make him feel proud of himself.

### Sample

"Good morning, students:

"Dr. Ralph Bunche was born in 1904 in Detroit, Michigan. As a boy, he listened to his

grandmother and studied very hard. He graduated with a doctor of philosophy degree.

"He chose for his life's work helping to keep peace in the world as a member of the United Nations. He helped to settle a war between the Arabs and Israel. This made him very proud of himself.

"Remember him, boys and girls, as a statesman who loved peace. Think of what you can do today to feel proud of yourself."

### **Guidelines**

Since the plan started as a listening program for children, models had to recognize the wide span of maturity levels represented in 1,200 youngsters from kindergarten to grade 6.

- Brevity, enthusiasm, and information likely to arouse pupil interest were insisted upon.

- No teacher or child could be marked tardy until after the regular school day began.

- When teachers were not present for the opening exercises, pupils were seated in the school's cafeteria with parental supervision.

- Participants had to volunteer. There could be no solicitation or force.

- Three minutes were allotted for the talk. Three minutes were allotted for listening to beautiful music by black composers over the intercommunication system. Three minutes were given for classroom discussions giving children an opportunity to react to the speech. One minute was allowed for pupils to think about what activity they could possibly engage in that day which would make them feel self-pride. Pride in self-achievement was emphasized throughout the day in each class.

### **Evaluation**

The first year's effort brought a big surprise. Pupils voted overwhelmingly to carry on the program with one major change: they no longer wanted to listen to teacher and parent models; they wanted their own show. They wanted to hear their voices over the intercom. They decided to do the necessary research, prepare and present the lesson, create their own guidance thought.

Pupils suggested that each grade be allowed an opportunity to participate in the program. Every day the principal introduced the speaker as "Our Hero for the Day." She asked the students, parents, and staff to shake the hero's hand, give a word of commendation, and think of ways to accord him or her special treatment that day. For example, the cafeteria manager gave the hero a free lunch and added a little something extra that no one else had—perhaps a cookie.

### **Second Year**

The second year belonged to the children. All talks were pupil oriented. Teachers and librarians encouraged students in their research to find something about the childhood of the famous black Americans they wished to portray.

They became the Black Heroes. Their achievements in art, music, literature, and sports were reported and rewarded. Students who displayed traits of leadership or citizenship were given badges proclaiming them Black Heroes for the day.

The lessons presented daily were prepared and delivered by the students. Teachers were available for help and advice, but for the most part the student was encouraged to do his or her own talk in his or her own way.



In each class, a Black Studies Center provides a valuable resource.

In each classroom a Black Studies Center was set up. Here could be found the poetry of Langston Hughes, recordings of Marian Anderson and Louis Armstrong, filmstrips on the lives of many black Americans, books dealing with the history of Africa, its culture, its people, its beauty.

Also in this center could be found the work of the children. Their creative writings, poetry, art, attempts at sculpture—any effort a child made to express himself was proclaimed as worthy and exhibited proudly. The program was producing results beyond the expectations of the faculty. The children had taken over, and their interest and enthusiasm had fostered a new feeling of achievement and pride.

Current events centers were becoming filled with news of black Americans. Julian Bond, Shirley Chisholm, Flip Wilson, and so many others were providing the children with images in the news. Positive and beautiful self-images! Members of the community and,



Students research, prepare, and present lessons on famous black persons.



Youngsters can identify positively with the black Americans they study.

in some cases, the parents of the children were invited to participate in the Early Bird Guidance Program. A black contractor who had a very solid reputation addressed the students. A politician did likewise. The president of the PTA also had his day.

Negro History Week was celebrated in a most spectacular way. Participation was school-wide and extended into and beyond the community. Highlights of the week were a Clean-Up Campaign sponsored by the sixth graders and a Jazz and Blues Fest presented by the fifth graders. Every child in the school became a part of this celebration. Boys and girls from all the grades were invited to submit their creative endeavors.

All work done by the children was put on display. The library became a show place for African dolls and sculpture. Paintings and drawings by these young black children transformed the cafeteria into a gallery. Original dances, creative writings, and poetry were the basis for the assembly programs.

In short, Negro History Week was celebrated, giving proper recognition to all Negroes, but the emphasis was on the students. They were the reason for the celebration. They were the ones being honored during this exciting and festive week.

Interest and enthusiasm remained high for the rest of the school year. Evaluation indicated that progress had been made and the program was not only improving the

self-concept of the children, but teaching them self-determination and self-reliance as well.

### Third Year

While far from remaining static, the third year of the program did level off. By now, the students expected Black Study Centers to be set up. They anticipated the morning programs in which they would participate. Activities that were innovative the past year were now expected by the students.

Interest in current events was extended. The election of a new governor in Louisiana helped to nurture this interest. Black candidates were successful in several of their attempts to be elected to the legislature, and this produced in the students a sense of achievement and pride. When the students expressed a desire to attend the swearing-in ceremonies of the new black legislators, a bus was chartered and a day in the state capitol provided them with the unique opportunity of witnessing black men become part of the state governing body.

Activities at the school this year manifested the desire and the needs of students. Early Bird Guidance was now an ongoing curriculum activity. The procedure of exposing the entire student body and giving even kindergartners a chance to participate developed a vast pool of student leaders to continue the project.



During Negro History Week, pupils share their creative endeavors with the community.

During the third year students took the program to the classroom with role playing in language and social studies. The school system encourages black studies in the curriculum and library activities. The school has a wealth of Black books, filmstrips, recordings, and an artifact display.

It is noteworthy that the challenge has by no means been met. On the contrary, the guidance program at the school served to prove that a real need existed, and that this need could be met. All schools, sooner or later, must face the challenge and provide a curriculum that will meet the needs of their youngsters. Those communities which are sensitive to the needs of their young will not hesitate to innovate. Since a child's curriculum encompasses his total learning experiences, the schools must act now!

Black children's self-concept can become more positive. Student evaluations show the success of the trend toward assembly programs created by pupils. The pupil coordinating committee will work during the summer setting up the assembly programs as Black History Learning Experiences. Creative work of pupils will reinforce black history presentations.

The community looks forward to future leadership emerging as an outcome.

—ZENOBIA M. JOHNSON, *Principal, Joseph A. Hardin Elementary School, New Orleans, Louisiana.*



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