

NEWARK LIVING STUDIES CENTER: A SCHOOL FOR DISRUPTIVE STUDENTS

W. A. PROCTOR*

Many "disruptive children" are served by the "Living Studies Center" in Newark, Delaware. Here the central aim is to develop a curriculum based on high interest activities outside the conventional school environment.

EDUCATORS and parents are most fortunate in that the vast majority of students profit unusually well from current educational treatment. However, many students sustain themselves in the public school by simply coping minimally with the demands or expectations of the educational environment. To a degree, this involves a conflict in life style, needs, and learned behavior that is inconsistent with similar aspects of the school itself.

Historically, alternative responses of the schools have been limited and noncreative in that most children have been expected to adapt to the perceptions of the school in order to survive or become defensive and not

survive. What the schools need is a better understanding of all students in terms of life style, needs, and learned behavior in order to foster an ecology conducive to effective learning with a concomitant of social competence.

Curriculum Model

In many children, linguistic or language development is adequate or more than adequate to handle the basic skills. These are children who feel extremely comfortable in situations that provide cultural and academic stimulation of a formal nature. As a rule, these students are highly conforming and relate well to a person in a position of authority. They are interested in achieving good grades or receiving other symbols of achievement. While they may be inadequate in practical or social situations because of fears,

* W. A. Proctor, Principal, Special Education, Newark Public Schools, Delaware

they often resort to academic work as a compensation.

These are students who need little scolding and preaching. Their ability to acquire theoretical knowledge is superior. Long range goals are excellent and the students work with perseverance, with good results. They are well disciplined and under good self-control. Concentration, organization, and use of time and energy are well

developed. They are independent and can make up their minds quickly. Their approaches to problem solving are highly systematic and basically analytical. Most important, these children have the tools to learn, can be aroused, will persevere, and respond to normal reinforcements.

Disruptive Child

Many students operate with a reduced level of aspiration. All verbal organization of ideas is a chore and often resented. Attitudes are nonconforming, and there is a basic problem in relating to authority. Interaction with people and things is accomplished in an aggressive manner. Learning seems to take place best through concrete manipulation of materials. Unfortunately, most of the children are deficient in self-control and possess little ability to assume responsibility. Lack of sustained attention



Photos courtesy of the author

Reading skills are developed indirectly as the boys work on this car.

to assigned tasks or routine assignments is most evident.

They tend to give up easily, are impulsive, and demand immediate rewards. Distractibility is a deterrent to their learning. Their frustration tolerance is rather low. These students operate on interest and often are unwilling to put forth effort in teacher-directed tasks. They may be so dependent that they are unable to make decisions or so independent that they constantly want to do what they want to do, when they want to do it.

Another group may manifest disordered perceptions of reality. Thought and cognition interfere with day-to-day success in school. These children often learn the basic skills, but they are unable to apply their knowledge in the typical classroom situation. In the area of reality, many children develop an attitude of insecurity and fearfulness. They often lack confidence and feel unaccepted. Self is sometimes not accepted as being worthy. Their ability to interact with others is limited because of a feeling of not being accepted. They do not understand themselves or others. Tensions, fears, uncertainties, and inferiorities lead to a strong defensive reaction to social situations. Cognition is disturbed by deflections of thought processes from the main topic into irrelevant details. There is much emotionality in thoughts with an inclination to jump helter-skelter from beginning to end. Mood variability ranges from extremes of elation to depression. In short, they exaggerate or ignore the meanings of success and failure.

The preceding descriptions of students are not to project needs for a track program, but simply to observe needs so that common elements may be derived from the organism. Only so can we bring the environment into focus by enhancing our own knowledge of children's capacity for growth and pleasure. We can also foster children's sense of dignity effectively through a teacher-child relationship that is humanistic in nature and based on a high degree of sensitivity to the teacher's role in dealing with specific aspects of the whole child in a selective learning environment.



Newark Living Studies Center

The Newark Living Studies Center, operating in a warehouse leased by the Newark, Delaware, School District, attempts



In the Newark Living Studies Center a balance is maintained among direct, model, and indirect levels of experience.

to improve the quality of educational experience currently available to exceptional children at the middle school level.

The working hypothesis of the program is that, as the curriculum becomes more relevant for the target population, observable changes in the behavior of the experimental group, as compared to the control group, will occur.

The central aim of the Living Studies Center is the development of a dynamic curriculum based on high interest activities outside the conventional school environment. A balance among direct, model, and indirect levels of experience is maintained.

Procedures drawn from modern instructional technology are utilized in the ongoing analysis of curriculum. Continual recording of pupil reaction to curriculum *as it is developed* serves as a guide to completion of the curriculum plan. However, only the details

of study units are negotiable; the guiding principles may not be altered.

Theoretically, the program extends the Premack Principle to make curriculum its own sufficient reinforcement; that is, instead of using high interest activities to reinforce

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the occurrence of low interest activities, the program attempts to build "living studies" directly into the high interest activities themselves.

The nature of the Living Studies project does not permit construction of a strict sequence of activities to be followed throughout the year. Curriculum is largely determined by patterns of interest developed by the youngsters as the project progresses. This means that the activities at point C will be influenced by the results of efforts at earlier points A and B. To provide a detailed curriculum plan would be contrary to the central method of the project and would be the surest way to take the life out of "Living Studies."

The program began its third year in September 1974. Over one hundred students have been served during the past two years and returned to the mainstream. Significant improvements for the experimental group as compared to the control group have been observed in the areas of reading, spelling, mathematics, attendance, reduced disruptive behavior, and increased task-relevant behavior.

While the "Living Studies Center" appears to be a viable program for the disruptive student, much still must be learned relative to long-range programming for this population. □

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