PROGRESS BOOKS IN MINIMUM ESSENTIALS

A Reform in Minimum Essentials Through Individualized Instruction.

Our task as present day educators is one much more strenuous than the mere winning of converts to a new cause. We must find a unifying core of thought that will weave the good of child directed experience onto the warp of the values of the "old school" education. For there were values, outstanding ones. There was a grasp of the fundamentals, and a toughness of moral fiber that we could well use today.

Right there is the problem. Alongside of activity teaching we must emphasize the minimum essentials in the tool subjects. Not that we need less richness of experience for our children—it is still only the favored few who are reveling in large activities—but that we who are emphasizing this child purposing should remember that it is also applicable to the fundamentals. To appreciate how worthwhile this application is we need only to consider that, for 90% of the children of our country, school is still bare fundamentals, and that while the teachers of this 90% are apt to look askance at activity teaching, they eagerly grasp better procedure in these fundamentals. Realizing these facts, the Training School at Harrisonburg has selected as its main activity for the year 1922-23, reform in minimum essentials through individualized instruction.

In this work we have clarified our thought by reducing it to definite statements. First, the fundamentals are intriguing to the child. The poorest of teaching does not entirely kill his interest, for it is by his ability to read, write, and spell that he gauges his progress. Moreover, when blocked off into definite goals, these tool subjects compete with activities in arousing sustained attention. Second, there is a tremendous waste of time in the teaching of these basal skills. For instance, the fifth-grade teacher usually begins her arithmetic with a month's review of the four fundamental processes. A standard test would doubtless reveal certain children who are already up to the fifth-grade norm. Yet, although these children may be poor readers, or spellers, they are dragged through the review. In the meantime they are losing their interest in arithmetic and acquiring the pernicious habit of succeeding without effort. How much more sensible it would be to have them spend this arithmetic time in strenuous work on their weak place. Third, these fundamentals are essential for activities, not only in life, but in the early elementary grades. The child who has been fired with the desire for information about a topic needs to know how to read in order to gain it for himself; in various phases of the activity he encounters situations needing number; unless he has skill in writing and spelling he is hampered in the expression of the experience he has gained. In fact, the self-realization sought for in activity teaching is aided by emphasis on the tool subjects. To illustrate: the embryonic artist has a right to demand from the school "white hyacinths to feed his soul." But along with this richness of experience, we feel that he needs minimum essentials in health habits that he may build up a strong body, ability to read, that the world of literature may be opened early to him, minimum essentials in arithmetic and spelling, to meet the demands of social life. That is, even for this gifted child there are certain basal skills as fundamental as is courtesy. Fourth, these minimum essentials lend themselves well to the better methods. Give the child his arithmetic in definite blocks of subject matter—tangible goals—and he has the "will to learn." Furthermore he experiences responsibility and self direction, and feels the thrill of success only after effort. For the slow child is allowed to take his own pace, the bright child is given problems suited to his caliber; neither is permitted to swing on to the class. That is, the "progress book," as we call our record of the blocks of subject matter, has individualized the instruction.

These books are being made, from the first through the eighth grade, in our Training School. They include arithmetic, writing, phonics, spelling, formal language, and reading. They do not touch the large activities by which we are enriching the curriculum. In fact, the two schemes complement each other, giving the child a completeness of life experience. In making these books the children above the first grade can help; they gain much good by so doing. The only expense is the paper; in fact, one of our chief aims has been
to plan the books so that the classroom teacher could use them.

Definite description of the progress book for various grades will appear in later numbers of The Virginia Teacher. To illustrate their use, let us visit the first grade arithmetic class. The page in the progress book reads, "I can write the numbers to 100." The children work at the blackboard, calling for guidance at critical places. When they feel sure of themselves, they turn away from the board and work independently on paper. If the teacher finds the work correct, she decorates the page with the coveted star. Then without loss of time the child tackles the next problem. A good part of the arithmetic period is spent in this way. Often a child who has made a certain goal helps one who has not. Sometimes they divide into groups around the room, with a student-teacher assisting each group. Sometimes the supervisor calls the class together for a group lesson. The saving in time is tremendous. I was in one room the other day when two boys who had finished their assigned work went to the book table seeking a poem to memorize. Their progress book has a page, "I know the following poems," and they were after another star. But, and here is the significant thing, when they were at leisure it never occurred to them to dawdle away their time, or to wait until the teacher set them to work. They had a job: a classmate was ahead of them, and they knew from experience that the only road to success lay by Hard-work Town.

This activity is planned and guided by the teacher, but it is child-directed in the best sense of the word, in that the child accepts the responsibility, and relies upon himself for the work, expecting guidance from the teacher only when he really does not know. It is all a great game, requiring as all real games do, the concentration of all of one's effort, offering rewards only for labor well done, and inculcating habits of accuracy, perseverance, and responsibility.

But what of the lazy child! Very few do not respond to the concreteness of the situation: the scorn of their fellows usually brings these around. In case a child still loafs, the teacher has a definite check and can bring force to bear, that is, supply an outer urge. But generally the urge is inner with a resulting high standard of method and results. And perchance by just such a scheme will the adherents of the old come to see that we who plead for the new are not running off after false gods of license and irresponsibility, that although we do insist that blind obedience must give way to freedom with accepted responsibility, we are nevertheless striving for child experience in faithful work, as well as in enriched subject matter.

Katherine M. Anthony

NOTE: The Training School claims no originality for this idea of definite goals. In working out the scheme, we have been helped by the goal books and practice sheets used by Supt. C. W. Washburne, in Winnetka, Ill. Miss Parkhurst's Education on The Dalton Plan, (E. P. Dutton & Company), really started us off, and has been most suggestive. The teacher who is interested is referred to this book, also to Moore, Minimum Essentials, (The Macmillan Company).

ACTIVITY ON ROBINSON CRUSOE

The teacher told the first part of the story without telling the children whom it was about. They knew immediately, however, that it was Robinson Crusoe; so they began to plan what they were going to do.

They decided upon something they would like to make, and divided into different committees to do this work. A group of boys built Robinson's cabin, using fertilizer sacks for the canvas door, and straw for the thatched roof. A group of girls made the umbrella from willow twigs. This was covered with cotton to represent the wool. They made a table and chair, also some dishes of clay to put upon the table. Baskets were woven with willow twigs and honeysuckle. One committee of boys cut Robinson's canoe from a log of wood, shaping it and hollowing out the inside. Another group made a grindstone like the one Robinson had.

When they could think of nothing else to make, they began to cut pictures to represent Robinson Crusoe in his different adventures; bright-colored paper was used. The different objects in the picture were cut from the color of paper which the child thought best, and then pasted on a background of suitable color. The children used their own ideas in designing and making these pictures; and it was surprising to see how true to the story the majority of them were.

One boy drew Robinson Crusoe on a large
piece of cardboard. He cut out the legs, then his arms, and finally his body. He fastened the legs and arms to the body with clamps. Then he fixed a string to both arms in such a way, that they would fly up when he pulled the string. Then poor Robinson Crusoe must have some clothes; and a very fine suit he had. He was covered with paper, which was cut in strips and pasted to his body. His cap was also made of the fringed paper. It had to look fringy to appear like goat-skin.

Polly Parrot was cut from cardboard and covered with pieces of appropriately colored paper for her feathers. Polly’s roost was on the back of the chair which they had made.

The story part was either read or told to the children by the teacher. The children were led to talk about it and compare his life with their own. Questions were asked that made them think and reason out why such and such a thing happened.

The poem by Cowper, I Am Monarch of All I Survey, was taught. The children learned a little song about Robinson Crusoe that had only one verse. They thought that it was too short and suggested that they make up some more verses. They picked out the words that rhymed and then thought out two other verses.

The children learned to spell a list of words taken from the “Story of Robinson Crusoe.”

| chair | cap |
| table | umbrella |
| parrot | yard |
| canoe | sheep |
| cabin | goat |

The children enjoyed all the work, and learned a great deal from the handwork, discussions, and story-telling.

For rhythm period I wrote words for a Three Bear Song, putting it to the tune of “Little Bo-peep.”

THREE BEARS
(Tune: Little Bo-peep)

Once upon a time there were three black bears;
They lived out in the wood.
They went to walk while their porridge got cold;
They walked as fast as they could.

They weren’t gone long until Goldenhair,
With light and graceful feet,
Came into their house, tried porridge and chairs,
And into their bed fell asleep.

After awhile the bears came home;
Each tried his porridge and chair.
He saw that someone had been in his house,
And soon found Goldenhair.

When she found in whose bed she’d fallen asleep,
She ran, as a little girl can.
She said she’d never come back again,
And that’s how the story ran.

Their appreciation of this was evident;
after I sang it over, one of the little boys piped up, “Sing it again!”

Unifying the free period, reading, and rhythm with the story makes for more interest, greater co-operation, and happier children. It therefore secures better work.

Two proposed aircraft carriers, estimated to cost $26,000,000 each, would require an amount of money sufficient to provide an increase of $800 per year for five years in the salaries of 13,000 school teachers.—WILL IRWIN, in The Next War.